PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 341

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
13 December—21 December 1999

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13 December 1999

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 341**

THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 13 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Type 45 Destroyer

2. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): When the type 45 destroyer will enter service. [100954]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): On current plans, the type 45 destroyer is expected to enter service with the Royal Navy in 2007.

Mr. Leigh: In 2007. Given the massive cuts in the defence budget, can the Minister guarantee even that derisory date?

Mr. Kilfoyle: The massive cuts came under the previous Government not this one, and they were cuts by stealth rather than by the comprehensive review that the strategic defence review represented. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, the type 45 will come on stream in 2007 and it will be managed in such a way that there will be no depletion of operational capability whatsoever.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): If these vessels are to come into operation and are to join the fleet in 2007, the orders for their construction will have to be signed soon. Dare I remind my hon. Friend the Minister that many of my constituents and other people who work along the Clyde want those orders to be signed and want a fair share of the work to come to the Clyde shipyards?

Mr. Kilfoyle: The orders for construction will be made in the new year. We are conscious that the shipbuilding industry in certain parts of the country relies heavily upon its capability for building military vessels. The Clyde will get more than its share of those contracts on the basis of its capacity to compete effectively with other yards around the country.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Does the Minister agree with the many people who are worried that the type 45 will carry the French SYLVER missile launcher, which will launch only one type of missile? Would it not be better to equip the ship with a multiple system that could fire Tomahawks and other missiles? That would turn this anti-aircraft destroyer into a truly multi-role combat vessel.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I think that the intention to purchase the principal anti-air missile system, as it develops, is very judicious. That will meet the operational demands that have been set out. I am absolutely confident that it will meet the needs of the Royal Navy, using the type 45 as its platform.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): After all the delays to the project that took place under the previous Government, may I welcome the fact that it is now back on track? Does that not demonstrate the great benefits that there will be from smart procurement? What is my

hon. Friend doing to ensure that smart procurement is being driven through at all levels in the Ministry of Defence, so that it is fully realised as early as possible?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out that this development comes from the previous Government's failure to ensure that the Horizon programme was properly conceptualised. We have ensured that the same deadline dates and the same operational capacities will be met. Our adherence to the principles of smart procurement will ensure that, in future, such purchases will be cheaper, will be delivered faster and will be far more efficient.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): The type 45 destroyer was announced in 1992 with an in-service date of 2002. Yes, that date slipped two years under the Conservative Government, but it has slipped three years in two years under this Government. That is just part of the problem. There is a lot of big talk about two aircraft carriers, but there is nothing said about the ships that will defend them or about the replacement for the type 23. We know that they are short of money to the tune of about £1 billion a year and that there is no hope of the £2 billion saving from smart procurement. When, for the sake of an industry that both sides of the House are interested in preserving, will we receive some straight answers? The compendium of staff requirements and targets was due for publication in September, but that date slipped into the spring. We have not had the strategic defence review figures on budget forecasts or a comprehensive spending review of more than a few lines. Will the Minister guarantee that we shall have before Christmas the first White Paper on defence spending since 1996 and will he guarantee that we shall debate it when the House returns in January?

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Gentleman overstates the case—to put it mildly—on the success or otherwise of the Horizon project. He makes rather spurious claims about slippage, but I assure him that the present Government took a very brave decision when they decided to review the plans for the type 45. We found out what the real slippage was and understood plainly what the previous Government failed to understand. We understood that we needed to ensure that we have the industrial capacity to meet such a complex order and to ensure that it takes place within a framework of affordability. The previous Government failed to do either.

European Defence Initiatives

3. **Mrs. Caroline Spelman** (Meriden): What discussions he has had with his European counterparts regarding spending on common defence initiatives. [100955]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): At the Helsinki European Council, European Union member states committed themselves to strengthening their military capabilities and to developing the means for the EU to act in support of its foreign and security policy objectives, strengthening the European NATO pillar and allowing the EU to undertake operations where NATO is not engaged.

Mrs. Spelman: President Chirac has said of the European Union that it

"could not fully exist until it possessed autonomous capacity for action in the area of defence."

That view is shared by Mr. Prodi. Is not that the clearest indication of an inevitable direction in defence policy towards a Euro army?

Mr. Hoon: No, it is not, and if the hon. Lady read carefully the conclusions of the Helsinki summit, she would find that there is a specific undertaking not to create a European army. What Helsinki does is good for Europe and good for NATO. By strengthening the European pillar of NATO, we are providing a greater capability for Europe to strengthen NATO's operations and, in particular, to allow the European Union, as I said few moments ago, to become engaged in operations where NATO is not involved.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): When does my right hon. Friend think that he will be able to make a decision on common spending and procurement, which affects not only Britain but Germany, France and Spain, on the heavy lift project? May I urge on him the solution of the A400M, which British Aerospace would participate in and which would be of huge benefit to my constituents in Broughton? I remind my right hon. Friend that, in a previous Administration, a Secretary of State for Defence said that he recognised the need for some 40 to 50 heavy lift aircraft—what we could call the A400M. It is insufficient to have only 25 to 30 such aircraft.

Mr. Hoon: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his ingenuity in asking such an erudite and thoughtful question, which I am sure is of passing interest to his constituents. I can assure him that the Government are considering carefully that procurement issue. That careful consideration will continue for some time yet, but I am confident that the decision will be made not too far into the new year.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Secretary of State answered my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) by talking about the EU defence capability. Is not the reality, however, that, after Amsterdam, the Prime Minister referred in the House to the plans—which he said that he had blocked—to move the Western European Union into the European Union and give the EU a defence capability as

"an ill-judged transplant operation"?

Is not it a fact, therefore, that in the past 12 months the Prime Minister and the Government have reversed what had been British defence policy for 40 years, and what the Prime Minister said was an ill-judged transplant operation has now become British defence policy?

Mr. Hoon: The UK played a leading role in shaping crucial European Union policy that strengthens the EU's ability to operate and to support its common foreign and security policy while, as I said earlier, strengthening NATO. On the subject of changes of emphasis, what is revealing is the Conservative party's obsessively anti-European tone. A once formidable political party has now assumed the status of a pressure group.

It is perhaps still more revealing that the Conservatives now rely on Baroness Thatcher to lead the charge, with the shadow Defence Secretary following closely behind. The hon. Gentleman refers to Baroness Thatcher as small children refer to a security blanket. He should consider carefully the cautionary tale that says,

"keep a hold of Nurse, For fear of finding something worse."

Mr. Duncan Smith: As ever, the Secretary of State talks rubbish. The truth is that the Prime Minister has not introduced a change of emphasis; he has turned British defence policy round by 180 deg. The Secretary of State glibly refers to that policy change as a change of emphasis, but that is not what they believe over in Europe.

Mr. Prodi knows exactly what is going on when he talks about the inevitability of a Euro army. The French are absolutely clear when they say that the policy is a breathtaking reversal of British policy. The Italians are clear when they say, after conversations with the British Government, that the Euro army will number 120,000. Above all, in the past four days the Russians have welcomed the Euro army. Why? They say that it will decouple the United States from Europe and render European defenceless and less capable. Will that not be the Government's epitaph?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman has been trying hard to decouple the United States from the United Kingdom and Europe. Indeed, he has gone to the US deliberately to scaremonger on that particular subject. He cannot get round the fact that Strobe Talbott said at Chatham House,

"the US is for ESDI".

The US supports that policy. If the hon. Gentleman reads the *Financial Times* today, he will see that there is further United States support for a stronger European pillar.

It really is deeply depressing for the remaining few pro-Europeans on the Conservative Benches to find that, unlike when the party was led by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), it is apparently ever more dependent on Margaret Thatcher. We were told that, under the right hon. Gentleman, she was a back-seat driver. Now, she is sitting firmly in the front seat, driving the party's policy.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Yet again—this is the third time—the Secretary of State will not answer the real questions. There will be no extra spending by any European Government on the proposal. The capability will be no greater; it is more likely to be less. As we saw in the Sunday papers, east Europeans who recently joined NATO are scared stiff because they are excluded from the process and the United States is worried to the extent that it carries out an inquiry. What the Prime Minister does not say publicly is that he has agreed to Mr. Solana becoming the Defence Minister for Europe. Will not the Government's policy leave us with a common European army policy, which is the same as the common agricultural policy—a disaster?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman should know that questions of defence spending are a matter for national Governments, and that the matter to which he referred is one for our European partners. He would equally know, if he had read the Helsinki summit conclusions carefully, that a specific commitment on capability was agreed, and that each country signed up to it. That means that each country must make available such forces and assets to deliver up to a 60,000-strong rapid reaction force into a theatre of operations quickly. That is clear and practical and, I am proud to say, something which the British Government led the way in negotiating and framing.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): If the European defence initiative represents such a threat to NATO, will the Secretary of State explain why all 19 NATO countries, including the United States, signed a declaration of support for it at the Washington summit?

Mr. Hoon: I have puzzled for some time over why Conservative Members cannot understand the plain statements of representatives of the American Administration and senior figures in Washington. They have made it clear, as did William Cohen, the United States Defense Secretary, at a recent NATO ministerial meeting in Brussels, that the improvement of European capability "will strengthen NATO", and that there is no ground whatever for any speculation of a possible division between Europe and the United States. If Conservative Members were able to be less obsessively anti-European and looked at the facts a little more clearly, they would come to the clear conclusion reached by our friends in Washington.

Leisure and Recreation Facilities

4. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): What recent representations he has received regarding the use of his Department's leisure and recreation facilities by civilian members of the public; and if he will make a statement. [100956]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): We welcome public use of the Department's leisure and recreational facilities provided that it does not conflict with the Department's operational purposes, safety or security requirements, or the interests of the Department's landlords, tenants or conservation. Where such use is agreed, fees are usually charged and an appropriate insurance policy is put in place. Representations are received frequently from members of the public wishing to use such facilities. Such requests are either agreed or denied based on the above constraints.

Mr. Ruffley: May I draw the Minister's attention to the £4 million new facility at Wattisham MOD base in my constituency, which is a physical and recreational training centre comprising a 25 m swimming pool, physiotherapy and weight-training rooms and a sports hall? Is he aware that some of my constituents have pointed out that, given that taxpayers paid for that excellent new facility, local civilians in the Needham market area should be allowed access to it? As everyone is interested in getting value for taxpayers' money, will he consider implementing arrangements at the Wattisham base to allow local civilians to use those fine facilities?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments about Wattisham. He may not know it, but that is one of two pilot schemes, which are evidence of the success of the smart construction initiative. I have been

there and seen the fine work being done. I would be more than happy for the people of Wattisham to be able to access those facilities, subject to the constraints that I mentioned, and subject to the unit commander reaching agreement with local community representatives on the use of those facilities.

Territorial Army Volunteer Reserve

5. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What assessments he has made of the prospective level of recruitment and retention in the TAVR during each of the next three years. [100957]

6. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the level of recruitment to the Territorial Army. [100958]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): My Department has recently completed an assessment of anticipated recruitment and retention for the reserves as part of the armed forces' forward manpower planning. We are confident that, over the next three years, the reserve forces will be able to both recruit and retain sufficient numbers of volunteers to fulfil and sustain the roles set out for them in the strategic defence review.

Mr. Hughes: That is an encouraging answer. However, I gather that only three out of five reservists are available to go into service, having finished their training, and that in the field hospital just over the river in my constituency in Walworth, for example, only about half have signed up for humanitarian aid or multinational work because of the financial implications of that. Will the Minister re-examine the terms and conditions that can be offered to doctors, nurses and the like, who want to be available as reserves to do humanitarian work with our services, but at present cannot do that without prejudice to their jobs or their careers?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman touches on an important point. I am pleased to say that we have had constructive discussions with the NHS regarding the availability of those who work in the NHS and who are also members of the reserve forces. It would be fair to say that there were difficulties in the past, but those have decreased and we are getting far fewer complaints in that regard. If, however, the hon. Gentleman wants to raise specific concerns with us, I should be more than happy to look into them, recognising that there has been a great improvement in relations, to the benefit of both the NHS and the defence medical services.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister confirm that, for the first time since the second world war, whole units of the Territorial Army are being called up for a peace-keeping role in Kosovo and Bosnia? Will he also confirm that the cuts in the Territorial Army, which his Government have imposed, will represent savings of less than 1 per cent. of the total defence budget in any one year? Finally, will he recognise the effect on towns such as Guildford of cutting the historic tie between the TA and our town, and the effect that that will have on future recruitment not just in the Territorial Army, but in the main Army?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions. He spoke about calling up units. That was part of the legislation agreed by both parties under the previous Administration for reserve forces.

Mr. St. Aubyn: But not for cuts.

Mr. Spellar: I will come to the hon. Gentleman's second question. He insists on asking three questions in one, but I shall answer serially. The restructuring under the strategic defence review was to reshape our reserve forces to meet the needs of the post-cold war era, rather than the pre-cold war era, and therefore to focus less on home protection and reinforcement of infantry, and far more on the specialist roles of the various reserve services. We have been doing that successfully, to ensure that our reserve forces are both usable and used.

Departmental Land

7. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What progress has been made since 1 May 1997 in disposing of land and housing held surplus to requirements. [100959]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): My Department has made good progress in disposing of surplus land since 1 May 1997. During the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99, disposal receipts from such sales totalled some £302 million.

Mr. Pike: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Two of the three barracks in which I did my national service in the Royal Marines—Eastney and Deal—are now closed. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Government's record of selling such assets and using the proceeds to regenerate local communities is far better than that of the previous Government?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am bound to agree with my hon. Friend, but whether the Opposition would accept that is a different matter. Following the comprehensive spending review and the strategic defence review, we have set in train a process whereby, over a four-year period, we will raise more than £700 million in capital receipts from surplus assets. Moreover, we have a large number of brownfield sites dotted about the country and we fully intend to bring as many of those as possible back into practical use, rather than leaving them to rot away and waste, as was the case under the previous Government. The brownfield land alone would be enough to build 26,000 new homes.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Given that those figures are below the trend line required to meet the £700 million requirement; given that the first part of the figures would have included receipts generated from the defence cost studies process; given the time it takes to get property receipts into the budget; given that the Department is struggling hugely to meet its £2 billion a year efficiency savings programme, and, as we have just heard, that we have given a commitment to strengthen our military capability which is bleeding away as experience bleeds out of the armed forces and as the retention figures deteriorate, will the Department go back to the Treasury

to insist that the defence budget is not required to meet any undershoot if it fails to meet the property savings targets?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I hate to disillusion the hon. Gentleman, but the reality is that we shall meet our targets. We are ahead of the targets and doing extremely well with property sales. Some large sales are looming, which I think will take us beyond the figures that we have anticipated. I am confident that we shall meet all the ambitions that we have set out in the strategic defence review.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Through the success of my hon. Friend in the sale of housing and land that are no longer needed, will he ensure that overseas housing is brought up to a habitable standard and then ensure that our armed forces are treated as well overseas as in the United Kingdom, which will help with retention?

Mr. Kilfoyle: We are well aware of the problems for retention if we do not have a reasonable standard of accommodation both for single personnel and for those occupying married quarters. We are in discussions to ensure that we have a consistent standard of habitable accommodation for those serving at home and those serving abroad.

Iraq

8. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the southern and northern no-fly zones in Iraq. [100960]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The no-fly zones have served a vital humanitarian purpose for the past eight years in helping to limit Saddam Hussein's brutal repression of his own people. I very much regret Saddam's efforts to shoot down coalition aircraft carrying out these legitimate patrols. Let me make it clear. If Saddam stops trying to kill our aircrew, we will stop attacking the systems he uses to threaten them.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he explain what further action he can take to stop Iraq's campaign of repression in the south, where I understand that villages are still being destroyed? I understand also that villagers are expelled at gunpoint and that water supplies are cut off. Will the right hon. Gentleman explain also whether he expects the UN monitoring, verification and inspection commission to be more or less successful than the UN Special Commission in its monitoring role? Will he outline what the composition of that organisation is likely to be?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman will know that the United Kingdom has been heavily engaged in trying to promote a new resolution in the Security Council. We are in the end game of that process. I anticipate that there will be further discussions on that issue today in the UN in New York. As for the outcome, we are confident that the resolution that we have helped to draft will provide a sensible basis for dealing with Iraq and will provide an opportunity and a road towards lifting the sanctions while securing the interests of those countries in the region, which remain extremely concerned about the ability of Saddam Hussein to produce weapons of mass destruction. It is important that we find a new basis for dealing with Iraq. Until that happens, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept from me that we shall continue to put pressure on Saddam Hussein to maintain the no-fly zones, and to preserve the situation in the north and the south as our response to an overwhelming humanitarian necessity, where Saddam Hussein and his brutal regime are seeking to destroy the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of his own people.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I want to express my appreciation for the air and ground crews who operate missions over north and south Iraq. They endure considerable periods of separation from their families, especially over Christmas, on operations that are not without risk to the aircrews who fly them. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that sufficient Tornado offensive support airframes are available, especially while the mid-life update of the aircraft is taking place, to permit Tornado operations elsewhere if the need arises?

Mr. Hoon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes. I shall ensure that they are communicated to our forces in that region, who operate in extremely dangerous circumstances, putting their lives at risk to protect people on the ground. They will appreciate his sentiments. I assure the hon. Gentleman that there will be sufficient airframes to do that valuable and important job.

As I said earlier, we want to maintain the pressure on Saddam while ensuring that we do our best to protect those on the ground whose lives have been threatened in the past, and who continue to be threatened by Saddam Hussein's regime.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I congratulate the Government on the United Nations resolution, which combines humanitarian relief with a strategy to deal with Saddam's continuing capability to use weapons of mass destruction, and the possibility that he is developing a nuclear capability while continuing to develop chemical and biological weapons. Will my right hon. Friend remind people again of the latest report of Mr. van der Stoel, the UN Rapporteur on human rights, who makes it clear that repression, torture and inhumane treatment, as well as ethnic cleansing, continue in Iraq?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree with her comments. We hope that we can persuade all members of the Security Council to agree to the resolution. The matter remains under discussion, but we are working as hard as we can on what, I believe, is an excellent statement of the international community's position.

I also agree with my hon. Friend about the latest evidence to emerge from Iraq. Some people claim that the international community is responsible for the plight of the Iraqi people, but there is a clear difference between the availability of medical and food supplies in the north of Iraq, which is not controlled by Saddam's regime, and that in rest of the country. That nails the lie that the

international community is responsible for the Iraqi people's plight. The responsibility lies with Saddam Hussein and his brutal regime.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The majority in the House support the Government's action. However, will the Secretary of State listen to the advice that we received last week from the equivalent of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Assemblée Nationale in Paris? I shall quote from it—I ask hon. Members to excuse my translation. It states:

"The loss of sovereignty of Iraq, especially in the North of . . . the country, is not admissible."

It goes on to call for all sanctions to be lifted.

Does the Secretary of State accept that the peoples and Parliaments of the European Union perceive the interests of those European nations differently? That is why France takes a different line from Britain in the Security Council. Does he accept that undermining NATO with a Euro-army will also undermine our national interest?

Mr. Hoon: I congratulated my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) on his ingenuity. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not extend the same courtesy to him. The answer to his point is simple: there is a range of views in western European democracies, and it would be unfortunate if they were not expressed. That is different from the position in Iraq, where there is no possibility of expressing such a range of views. It is inevitable that tensions will arise when the country is led by a man such as Saddam Hussein. Those tensions will continue unless and until there is a democratic Government in Iraq.

Aircraft Rewiring

9. **Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody** (Crewe and Nantwich): What steps his Department has taken to check the wiring of military aircraft following recent crashes; and how many military aircraft have been rewired as a result. [100961]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): As a result of damaged, mishandled or misrouted wires, instances of electrical fires caused two Harrier aircraft accidents in 1991. As a result of those accidents, remedial action was taken and there is no evidence that any recent crashes were caused by problems with electrical wiring. The safety of electrical wiring in UK military aircraft is reviewed continuously. Wiring is inspected whenever maintenance activity takes place on an aircraft. We work closely with the British Standards Institution to ensure that aircraft wiring meets the highest standards of safety and installation.

Mrs. Dunwoody: That all sounds very comforting, and I am happy to hear it, but my hon. Friend will be aware that the length of life of some of the aircraft in the list that he was kind enough to give me is way beyond what was originally envisaged for them by the builders. There is a real worry that wiring faults, in military and civil aircraft, may be a contributory cause of major crashes and it is difficult to inspect all the systems when looking at the wiring of an aircraft during maintenance. Will my hon. Friend please give me a guarantee that—despite his confidence in the efficiency of aircraft—he will look carefully in the immediate future at the type of wiring used and at any dangers that may arise from that?

Mr. Spellar: It is not unusual for military aircraft—so long as there is sufficient assurance about their safety—to run over the life that was originally predicted by either the purchasers or the manufacturers. A number of aircraft are updated with newer equipment, but the basic frame may stay the same. When we undertake routine wiring maintenance, wiring is often replaced and newer materials introduced, but there is also stringent and rigorous inspection and attention is paid to possible mechanical treatment of wiring. Often, the combination of the chemical qualities of the insulation and the mechanical treatment causes arcing and fires. As I said in my original answer, we have not had any evidence of that problem since 1991, but our engineering departments are alert to keeping a look out for it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What study has the Minister made himself of Kapton wiring and what conclusion has he reached?

Mr. Spellar: I am Spellar, PPE Oxford not MSc Eng.Chem. The hon. Gentleman points to the reasons why we have such extremely fine service engineers, on both the fitting and the technical and engineering side, who give us excellent advice. That is borne out by the fact that no fires have caused crashes since 1991, and I am rather surprised that the hon. Gentleman should cast such a slur on the excellent technical personnel in the Royal Air Force.

European Defence Co-operation

10. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What representations he has received from his French counterparts regarding European defence co-operation. [100962]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): At St. Malo in December 1998, the United Kingdom and France launched a major initiative aimed at building European security and defence. Since then, we have continued to work closely with our French defence counterparts, culminating in the joint declaration made at our London summit on 25 November. That declaration called on European nations to strengthen their military capabilities and was an important stepping stone towards the Helsinki European Council.

Dr. Lewis: Despite their many other virtues, have not our French allies for more than 40 years weakened the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation by staying outside its integrated military structure? Has not their main reason for that been pride, and resentment of America's role in defending Europe? By playing dangerous games with the formation of a Euro-army, are not the Labour Government undermining the prospects for our future conventional defence, just as they tried to undermine our prospects for successful nuclear deterrence in the 1980s?

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman goes to the Library, he will be able to find a copy of the Helsinki summit conclusions, which state that it has been agreed by the United Kingdom and the French Government, as well as

every other Government of the European Union, that the initiative is not leading to the creation of a European army.

As for defence co-operation with the French, the hon. Gentleman should consider these words:

"The relationship between British and French forces at operational level is fantastic. It should be developed. We are the two most serious countries about defence in Europe. . . . We need to do things together."—[*Official Report*, 10 June 1999; Vol. 332, c. 812.]

Those are excellent words. They are not my words, but the words of the shadow Foreign Secretary after St. Malo. Yet as soon as we try to do something together—remember: the shadow Foreign Secretary said that we need to do things together—the shadow Defence Secretary accuses us of trying to create a single European army and a vast European super-state. What is clearly required on the Conservative Benches is a little joined-up opposition.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): My right hon. Friend is confident that the common defence policy will not affect our relationship with the United States, but does he agree that the forces of isolationism are always just below the surface in the United States, and is he not concerned that these initiatives might give succour to people in the United States who want to tear up the anti-ballistic missile treaty, with all the consequences of that?

Mr. Hoon: Clearly, there are concerns in the United States. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] In a vigorous democracy it is inevitable that some people will take a particular view of a particular problem. However, there are no difficulties with the Administration and majority opinion on the Hill: they recognise that, by strengthening the European pillar of NATO, we are strengthening NATO as a whole.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Can the increased defence capability as proposed at the Helsinki Council be provided by the United Kingdom and France alone, or is it a non-runner unless there is greater public expenditure on defence by other European Union countries?

Mr. Hoon: As I said earlier, precise expenditure by other European Union countries is a matter for them. By agreeing to a capability assessment and to deploying specific forces to meet that assessment, European nations are saying that we will spend what is necessary to reach that conclusion. By specifying what forces and equipment are needed to reach that rapid reaction capability, we are specifying precisely what we need to do as European nations. We are improving the European pillar of NATO in a practical way. Those countries will have to decide how they should spend the money to achieve those ends. Having agreed the ends, we have achieved a practical conclusion that strengthens Europe inside NATO.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): Would my right hon. Friend confirm that Britain and France enjoy a close relationship on nuclear matters? My memory tells me that. Would he also confirm my recollection that the policy was put together by the Conservative party, which now doubts anything and everything French?

Mr. Hoon: I can recall an occasion in the 1980s on which the Government under Lady Thatcher were keen on closer Anglo-French co-operation—indeed, her major foreign policy adviser wrote about that recently. Perhaps Conservative Members should consider a little more carefully the history of these matters, especially the conclusion of the Berlin summit and the text of the Maastricht treaty, which show that they were in favour of European defence co-operation in the relatively recent past. They have now abandoned that view because of the obsessive anti-Europeanism that now infects the entire Conservative party.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with those who say that membership of the euro—the single currency—is essential to the success of a European defence force?

Mr. Hoon: No.

Kosovo

11. **Mr. Harry Cohen** (Leyton and Wanstead): What discussions he has had with his United States counterpart about that country's use of cluster bombs in Kosovo; what representations his Department has received on the use of cluster bombs; and if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the future role of cluster bombs. [100963]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I have had no discussions with the United States Defence Secretary on this subject.

The Ministry of Defence has received a number of inquiries from members of the public, as well as from hon. Members on both sides of the House, about the use of cluster bombs during the campaign over Kosovo. Within our international obligations, the United Kingdom's armed forces retain the right to use the most effective weapons systems available. Consequently, should there be a proven need to use cluster bombs in the future, we would do so. Denying ourselves the most appropriate weapons would not help to end conflicts quickly; it could also put our armed forces at greater risk of harm.

Mr. Cohen: Is the Secretary of State aware that cluster bombs used during the Kosovo conflict were dropped from a height of 15,000 ft, although they had been designed to be dropped from a much lower level? Did that not increase the number of bomblets that did not explode on hitting the ground, jeopardising the local population and, in effect, becoming land mines? Many hon. Members, including me, felt that military action over Kosovo was justified, but surely the use of cluster bombs in that way has put the allied forces on very shaky moral ground internationally. Will the Secretary of State reconsider the use of such weapons in all future conflicts, and discuss it with all our NATO allies—including the United States—so that cluster bombs are not used in the same way again?

Mr. Hoon: I appreciate my hon. Friend's concern, but, in a previous ministerial capacity, I examined the Ottawa convention very carefully, and there is no doubt that, as a matter of international law, a cluster bomb cannot be defined as a land mine in either the spirit or the letter of the convention. Given that there is no international pressure for the expansion of the convention to cover

cluster bombs, or to change the definition of a land mine to include them, I cannot accept my hon. Friend's argument.

Let me emphasise that KFOR and, significantly, British forces have been extensively engaged in clearing some 7,400 unexploded cluster-bomb munitions, as well as more than 6,100 Serbian anti-personnel mines and more than 3,400 Serbian anti-tank mines. British forces and KFOR are working hard to ensure that Kosovo is safe for its citizens.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the realities on the ground? The failure rate of cluster bombs is some 5 to 10 per cent. The right hon. Gentleman speaks of finding effective weapons systems; this weapons system is clearly failing, and is endangering the lives of those whom it was designed to protect. Surely, in such circumstances, the right hon. Gentleman can start thinking along the lines of an ethical defence policy.

Mr. Hoon: In fact, the failure rate is around 5 per cent.

As I said in my answer to the original question, we must ensure that we use effective munitions, not only to shorten conflicts but, crucially, to prevent our forces that are engaged in international humanitarian peacekeeping acts from being put at greater risk than they would be otherwise. That is why we must use the most effective weapons available to us, within our international obligations.

Centre for Defence Medicine

12. **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): When he plans to announce a decision on the future location of the Centre for Defence Medicine. [100964]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I am delighted to announce that, after careful consideration, the University Hospital Birmingham NHS trust has been selected as the host for the new centre for defence medicine. The three competing bids received from NHS trusts were all of a very high quality, but after rigorous evaluation, the University Hospital Birmingham NHS trust was found to meet our requirements most effectively.

The establishment of the Centre for Defence Medicine is an important landmark in our new strategy for the defence medical services. The centre will provide a very important professional focus for military medicine, and a prestigious place of work. The formal agreement with the trust is expected to be in place by 1 April, and the centre is expected to open by April 2001.

Mr. Cousins: Will my hon. Friend confirm that one in eight of the armed forces are recruited in the north-east of England, while only one in 100 jobs are located there? One of the three sites under consideration—an excellent site—was in the centre of the city of Newcastle. Does my hon. Friend realise that his announcement will be greeted with a good deal of dismay, disappointment and, indeed, anger in that area?

Mr. Spellar: I recognise that Newcastle, as well as Guy's and St. Thomas's, will be disappointed not to have been selected as the preferred host. I reiterate that all three bids were of extremely high quality, but we had to choose one, and the bid from the University Hospital Birmingham NHS trust was clearly the best and met the criteria. I fully understand what my hon. Friend has said. I understand the disappointment, but it was the best of three good bids.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): It is over a year since the Government announced the foundation of a centre of medical excellence, during which time a number of the prime candidates have dropped out, leaving only three. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the level of dismay that will be felt within defence medical services that the Government are pressing ahead with the plan? Is he aware that, if they were to proceed, the effect would be to transfer doctors and nurses from an area of medical deprivation—South Hampshire—to one which I understand has sufficiency? I use the word "would" rather than "will" because I forecast that doctors and nurses who have chosen in the past five years to move their homes and families to South Hampshire to be near the only tri-service hospital at Haslar will not move to Birmingham. The result will be that the Government's inept and disastrous policy will not succeed.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman has had a long and consistent record of representing his constituency on this issue. As he knows, I met him and his constituents at Haslar. The message that I got from people in the defence medical services was quite the reverse: they were asking for an early decision on the centre for defence medicine. They see that as an attraction and a key part of a future successful defence medical services. That is separate from the issue of the role of Haslar and the transfer to Queen Alexandra hospital, Portsmouth. They see the centre as an integral part of the defence medical services and a major attraction to young people wishing to be involved. All the messages that I get, not just from the chain of command, but from people on the ground, is that they are looking forward to the centre in Birmingham. They think that it is an exciting venture and prospect. When they become involved with the centre, they will find that that is what they joined up for, and what they will join up for.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): Now that a decision has finally been made, may I have an assurance that there will be no reduction in Ministers' efforts to solve the problem for the constituency of the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) and my own?

Mr. Spellar: I say to my hon. Friend and to all Members who represent the South Hampshire area that we are working extremely hard to effect a smooth and satisfactory transition. That is moving ahead. I accept that it is not an easy period for them, but we have exceedingly good relations now with the health authority, the health trust, the secondary care agency and representatives of the local council, whom I met in Gosport.

Eurofighter

14. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts regarding expenditure on the Eurofighter. [100966]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I meet regularly with my European counterparts for discussions on a wide range of defence issues, including Eurofighter. Recent discussions have focused on the excellence of the aircraft and its importance for European defence industry, rather than on expenditure.

Miss McIntosh: I wonder whether the Secretary of State could put my mind at rest on whether our European partners are paying their fair share of Eurofighter. Is he minded to indicate where the Eurofighter might be located? What steps will he take to inform residents who live near the respective RAF stations of what the implications will be for them?

Mr. Hoon: Eurofighter is a superb aircraft. It is the product of European co-operation. It is well on course to enter service as the RAF's front-line fighter for the new millennium. I am delighted to be able to announce that Coningsby in Lincolnshire, Leeming in North Yorkshire and Leuchars in Fife, with their proud history of RAF service dating back to the beginning of the second world war, have been chosen as Eurofighter's operational bases. I am sure that that announcement, which I hope will be communicated to all those with constituency interests in due course, will be welcomed by all the people associated with those bases, whether they are in the RAF, or part of the local communities.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The Secretary of State's announcement will be welcomed throughout the Royal Air Force. It is particularly welcome to those of us who have supported Eurofighter—or Typhoon as we must learn to call it—in the House of Commons, not least when we remember that one of the right hon. Gentleman's Conservative predecessors practically undermined the whole programme by trying to lease F16s from the United States. Will he tell us in a little more detail the programme for withdrawal of the Tornado F3 and the Jaguar aircraft? When does he anticipate the last of the 232 Eurofighters will be deployed?

Mr. Hoon: As I hope the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows—I thank him for his good wishes—we expect the first Eurofighter to be delivered to the RAF in mid-2002. There will then be a consistent and steady deployment programme, allocating Eurofighters, as they are constructed, to the different air forces that have ordered them. Therefore—if the right hon. and learned Gentleman will forgive me—I shall not be too specific about the final in-service and replacement dates. Clearly, however, the Eurofighter is a huge success for European co-operation, and I hope that that lesson will not be lost on Conservative Members.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): Will the right hon. Gentleman note that the Eurofighter is a European aircraft and ought to be armed with European weapons? In making a decision on the beyond visual range air-to-air missile, will he bear in mind that if we were to buy American for BVRAAM, there is a danger that the United States could veto sale of the Eurofighter to third countries?

Mr. Hoon: I shall certainly take those matters into account, and all those factors are being considered as part of the very careful evaluation of the various bids for the beyond visual range air-to-air missile. We are considering the matter very carefully.

RAF (Heavy Lift Requirement)

15. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement on the RAF's heavy lift requirement. [100968]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): The strategic defence review concluded that we needed to improve our strategic transport to deploy joint rapid reaction forces more quickly to meet operational requirements in the changed strategic environment. The SDR further considered a wide range of options for enhancing our strategic airlift capability. It concluded that, in the short term, we should meet our strategic airlift needs with C17 aircraft or their equivalent, and that, in the longer term, we should consider a suitable replacement for our remaining transport aircraft.

We are currently considering solutions in respect of both our short and long-term requirements, and expect to make an announcement in the House in the new year.

Mr. Gray: I thank the Minister for that reply. Will he join me in congratulating the airmen and airwomen of RAF Lyneham in my constituency, whose current fleet of C130K Hercules flew 497 sorties in operation Agricola—carrying 4,964 passengers, 277 vehicles, and an astonishing 2,483 tonnes of freight? Does he agree that the Kosovo operation would not have been possible without the Hercules? Rather than doing what may be more politically expedient and moving towards the European Airbus A400M replacement, will he therefore commit himself to replacing the current Hercules fleet with the C130J and the C17?

Mr. Kilfoyle: The short answer is no. There are three responses to the longer-term aircraft needs of the transport wing, and we shall evaluate each of those, just as we shall do for bids to meet the short-term requirements—according to criteria that have been clearly stated and against which we have practised assiduously since publication of the strategic defence review. We will ensure that there is value for money and that requirements on qualities such as interoperability are satisfied. We will also certainly ensure that we get delivery on time, and that the aircraft meet operational requirements.

Kosovo

16. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): If he will make a statement about the role of the Territorial Army in supporting the Regular Army in Kosovo. [100969]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The Territorial Army is an integral part of our armed forces, and many members of the TA are currently serving in the Balkans theatre of operations. As of 3 December 1999, 229 members of the TA were serving

in Kosovo. The TA also supports the Regular Army by back-filling jobs of Army personnel deployed in the region.

Mr. Edwards: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. Will he join me in saying that we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all Territorial Army members who are currently supporting the Regular Army, including the 17 members of the Royal Monmouth Royal Engineers currently deployed on humanitarian work in Bosnia and in Kosovo?

Mr. Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I have special affection for the Royal Monmouth Royal Engineers, because—as he will know—a part of the unit is in my constituency. My hon. Friend—like others who have been to Kosovo and to Bosnia—will be aware of the tremendous job being done and the enthusiasm and commitment being shown by reserve forces in those places. They are working alongside their fellows in the Regular Army—doing a job that is well done, and a job which—contrary to some of the assertions made by Conservative Members—is worth doing.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the Minister take this opportunity to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), which he tried to dodge? Is it not the case that, because of defence cuts, the Territorial Army is having to be deployed compulsorily for the first time since the second world war?

Mr. Spellar: As I said in my previous answer, it is strange for Conservatives to make that point, because it was the Conservative Government, with all-party support, who brought in the provisions for compulsory call-out under the Reserve Forces Act 1996, to make the TA and the reserve forces usable and used. I fail to understand why they have such a low opinion of the reserve forces that they do not think that we should be using them. They want to be used and we want to use them.

Helsinki European Council

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement.

Accompanied by my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, I attended a meeting of the European Council in Helsinki on 10 and 11 December.

The key decisions of the Helsinki summit were far reaching. It increased to 12 the number of countries involved in accession negotiations with the European Union and gave candidate status to Turkey for the first time. That presages a hugely enlarged European Union and, over time, with the membership of Turkey now formally on the agenda, one with its borders stretching as far as the middle east. In addition, it has significantly pushed forward European defence co-operation, allowing the European Union for the first time to build the capability of acting where NATO is not engaged. Those are truly historic decisions for the European Union.

Before the start of the summit, we learned of the decision of the French Government to refuse to abide by the decision of the European Union and lift the ban on British beef. As I said in this House on 10 November, it was always preferable to settle this through discussion and clarification, but, failing that, we would have to go to law. We worked hard to reach an understanding with France. In the end, the Commission tabled a summary of our response to French questions, which we and the Commission believed should have satisfied reasonable concerns. Unfortunately, the French Government were unable to agree. The Commission is now taking France to court and will issue its formal legal opinion tomorrow.

There were some who said that we should have tabled the issue at the Helsinki summit. I can think of nothing more counter-productive or misjudged. At present, British beef can be sold in 13 of the 15 European Union countries. The Commission is completely on side with us. The beef ban is in law lifted. To have reopened the entire issue—and given all 15 countries an obligation to debate an issue that the vast majority regard as closed—would have been tactical ineptitude on a grand scale. Neither do I think that it is sensible to threaten a trade war with France. We have trade with France worth billions of pounds and thousands of jobs. To break the law ourselves, while seeking to have it upheld against France, would be folly and we will not do it.

To return to the summit, the main issue was the enlargement of the European Union, which the Government strongly support. Democracy and the market economy are now firmly established in the majority of central and eastern European countries, which are increasingly ready to join the European Union. We also owe an obligation to those countries that stood by us in the Kosovo conflict earlier this year.

Six countries—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia and Cyprus—began negotiations last year. The European Council decided to open negotiations early next year with six more—Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Malta, Bulgaria and Romania. The process is lengthy and detailed, but it is now firmly under way.

On Cyprus, the European Council welcomed the negotiations under way in New York between the Cypriot leaders. Successful conclusion of those talks would not only bring a welcome end to a long-running dispute, but facilitate Cyprus's accession to the EU, and we urge all those involved to make every effort to reach agreement. But at Helsinki, Heads of Government endorsed our view that Cyprus's accession was a matter for decision by the member states of the European Union and there should be no preconditions.

The European Council also opened a new and much more positive chapter in its relations with Turkey. This has long been a preoccupation for Britain. Turkey is of great strategic importance and an ally in NATO. A more constructive relationship between Turkey and the EU is long overdue, but we now have secured that. Turkey is now a candidate country, destined to join the European Union on the same basis as the other candidates. It will enjoy all the benefits of other candidates, including financial assistance, even though accession negotiations are unlikely to begin for some time. However, it is an excellent outcome.

The intergovernmental conference next year is aimed at preparing the Union for the impending enlargement. The Helsinki Council confirmed that the conference should focus on the size and composition of the European Commission, the weighting of votes in the Council and the possible extension of qualified majority voting, in certain limited areas. The conference will begin in February and complete its work by the end of next year.

On security and defence, the European Council endorsed our view that the top priority is for European nations to strengthen their military capabilities. At Helsinki, we agreed that member states should, by 2003, be able to deploy and sustain for at least one year military forces of up to 50,000 to 60,000 troops, capable of a range of tasks essentially defined as humanitarian and rescue missions, peacekeeping or peace enforcement.

There have been suggestions that this agreement to increase the options open to us in future crises has adverse implications for NATO, or that the European Union is creating a European army. That is the opposite of the case. The European Council made it clear that the EU will launch and conduct military operations only where NATO as a whole is not engaged. The process will involve full consultation and transparency with NATO. The six non-EU allies will be involved and consulted before decisions are taken, and will be able to take a full part in resulting operations. The EU will avoid unnecessary duplication with NATO. Final decisions on whether to involve troops will remain firmly with national Governments. These arrangements, as the Helsinki Council made clear explicitly, do not imply a European army.

However, it would be a tragic mistake—repeating mistakes of British European policy over the past few decades—if Britain opted out of the debate on European defence and left the field to others. This is a debate that we must shape and influence from the start, because our vital strategic interests are affected by it. As a result of our participation, it is moving in a clear direction—reinforcing NATO, not in opposition to it. I completely reject the view of those who would have us opt out of this issue altogether.

The conflict in Chechnya was much on our minds at Helsinki. Our relationship with Russia is a vital one, above all for the security and stability of our continent. We want Russia to continue on the path of democracy,

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the market economy and the rule of law, and will continue to support the transition process. But business as usual is not possible while human rights are being comprehensively abused in a corner of the Russian Federation. The EU called for a political solution to this issue and adopted a series of actions designed to back up the words of strong condemnation.

On the withholding tax, the Council agreed a sensible way forward. We will continue to work for a solution to the issue of tax evasion that rightly concerns some of our EU partners, Germany in particular. But this cannot be done at the expense of a major European financial market based here in London. I have made it clear that we will not permit that. We also have genuine concern about the efficacy of the measures proposed.

We have also insisted that, in debates on the way forward, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's proposals for an exchange of information on the basis that involves more than just EU member countries should be examined. There is increasing recognition that it is no good adopting measures in the EU if the only impact is that the market in savings moves outside the EU. The rest of the tax package we can support, although of course other countries have difficulties with parts of it.

The Helsinki summit dealt with pressing issues of the day, but also had a vision for the future. We made the historic decision that the Europe of the future would be one that embraced countries in eastern Europe that 10 short years ago were only just emerging from totalitarian communist rule. This enlarged Europe is one that would have been unimaginable until the very recent past, and it is one that we should embrace.

We also all made the decision that our continent of Europe, which twice this century has lost millions of its citizens in the two most bloody wars in human history, should now co-operate in defence where the object is to help keep the peace. A bigger European Union; a union committed to embracing countries committed to democracy; a Europe of nations determined to use their collective strength to advance our values—that is our vision, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): First, I welcome and support what the Prime Minister said about Cyprus and Turkey. I concur with him about the gravity of the situation in Chechnya. The Opposition support the measures agreed at Helsinki, including the diversion of some of the TACIS funding. Russia's actions have been brutal, but it is in everyone's interests that we do not unwittingly destabilise the Russian economy or the progress of democracy in that country.

Overall, however, did not the Helsinki summit represent the complete failure of the Prime Minister's strategy on Europe? Before he came to office, the Prime Minister said:

"I will never allow this country to be isolated . . . in Europe."

Is not it true that he thought that all he had to do was concede and cave in to gain the good will of our European partners? Two and a half years after taking office, is not it apparent that he has got nothing in return for his caving in or his concessions? There is nothing left of his European policy, which has been exposed as one of astonishing naivety.

Is not the greatest example of that the fiasco of the beef ban? When he thought that the ban had been lifted earlier this year, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said:

"Labour leadership in Europe and our constructive approach . . . has clearly been shown to succeed."

In July, the Prime Minister told the House that the decision to lift the beef ban had come about

"because the Government have a constructive . . . attitude to Europe. That is why we got the beef ban lifted and it is another example of new Labour working."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 402-5.]

Today he is reduced to stating, rather pathetically:

"The beef ban is in law lifted."

Five months and several summits since the Prime Minister's statement to the House in July, is not the fact that British beef is still banned in Europe's two largest countries proof that Labour in Europe is not working? Is not it time that the Prime Minister admitted that he should have lifted our own ban on beef on the bone months ago, as the Opposition demanded, and that he should have begun legal proceedings months ago, as we argued? Should he not have been actively negotiating with the French, which is what we have called for throughout? *[Laughter.]* The Prime Minister thinks that he has been actively negotiating.

The Government veer between complacently announcing that the ban has been lifted and petulantly refusing to talk to the French when it is not lifted. The Prime Minister may think that he has been actively negotiating, but the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food went through a period when he would not pick up the telephone to speak to his French counterpart. The Anglo-French summit a fortnight ago passed happily by with beef neither on the menu nor on the agenda: where was the Prime Minister's active negotiation then?

The Prime Minister's complacency was finally shattered—and his petulance reached new heights—at Helsinki. A report in *The Sun* of 10 December stated:

"Mr. Blair was so angry he didn't even mention the crisis when he met with Lionel Jospin last night."

The Government are experts in the tactical ineptitude of which the Prime Minister accuses others. We know that he always says that, in fighting the beef ban, we have the law and science on our side. We do—but, unfortunately, we also have the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on our side, which is why the beef ban has not been lifted.

Beef provides one example of how Labour in Europe is not working, but the fiasco over the withholding tax provides another. Instead of vetoing the tax at the beginning, the Prime Minister has allowed the threat of it to hang over the City for more than a year, with all the damage that such uncertainty causes. The Chancellor's own Treasury report states that

"continuing uncertainty . . . will increase the likelihood that borrowers will look for alternative sources of finance outside the EU".

If the Prime Minister has been so tough about the tax, how is it that he has allowed that uncertainty to continue? How is it that, at Helsinki, he agreed to yet more talks? How is it that the German Finance Minister should have said on Friday that he had had

"differing signals from the British"?

How was it that the EU Tax Commissioner should have said that he is "hopeful and positive" about introducing a withholding tax in the next six months? Was not Helsinki the chance to end the uncertainty? Instead of simply vetoing the tax, should not the right hon. Gentleman have insisted that it would never be introduced by the back door through qualified majority voting?

European defence was also on the Helsinki agenda. We are in favour of an enhanced European defence capability within NATO. However, we are concerned about the current development of what is euphemistically called readily deployable EU military capabilities outside NATO—in other words, a European army.

Has the Prime Minister seen the comments of the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO in Europe in *The New York Times* today? General Wesley Clark says:

"the main American concern . . . is decoupling or duplication or discrimination against non-EU, European members of NATO".

General Clark also says:

"the new European plan has the potential to cause long-term irritation for the United States."

It is no good saying that the Americans are not worried about it—the Secretary of State for Defence admitted that they are only moments ago at Question Time.

Does the Prime Minister remember saying at the Amsterdam summit two years ago:

"Europe's defence should remain a matter for NATO and not the EU",

and calling the very plan to which he has now signed up

"an ill-judged transplant operation"?

The decision to establish a defence identity outside NATO is momentous—it is one of the biggest changes in foreign and defence policies on which the Government have embarked. We believe that it has profound dangers. Is not it time that the rationale for and considerable risks of the change were fully explained to the House?

Does not the challenge of European Union enlargement most starkly expose the fact that Labour in Europe is not working? We think that enlargement is the single most pressing issue facing Europe today. We believe that an enlarged Europe cannot work unless it is more flexible, unless countries can be in the European Union but not run by the European Union. The Prime Minister believes the opposite—that Europe needs to be more integrated, that more powers and rights of member states need to be transferred to Brussels. Sometimes the right hon. Gentleman leads the way on integration and sometimes he gets dragged along in that direction, but that is always the path that he takes. That is why at the Helsinki summit he agreed to an open-ended discussion on abolishing the veto, the development of a European army and more tax harmonisation.

The Prime Minister has managed to pull off the unbelievable double of signing up to the integrationist agenda while simultaneously being isolated in Europe. Baroness Thatcher was isolated when she won Britain the rebate, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was isolated when he won the opt-out from the single currency. Those British Prime Ministers may have sometimes been isolated, but they came back with something that we needed. Is not the right hon. Gentleman the first British Prime Minister in history to return from a summit both isolated and empty handed?

The Prime Minister: I think that when we got to Baroness Thatcher, we pretty well worked out the true author of that remark.

Let me deal with some of the issues raised by the right hon. Gentleman. He accuses us of not doing enough for enlargement. His policy, let me remind him, is to block enlargement. He is committed to blocking enlargement unless the European Union agrees to a treaty change. All 15 member states have to agree to such a treaty change, but not one does. Is there one? The idea of lectures from the right hon. Gentleman on doing more for enlargement illustrates how completely fatuous his policy on Europe has become.

As for beef, I thought that the right hon. Gentleman's criticism today was a trifle different from before—he is now accusing me of not negotiating enough. For weeks Mr. Yo-yo has been round the television studios, saying that I was a puppet dancing to Mr. Jospin's tune and asking why I was talking to him instead of fighting. It is another fatuous position. *[Interruption.]* The Tories shout, but let me remind them of one big difference between us and them. When we came to power, how many countries could British beef be sold in? It was a round figure, approximating to zero—and that was after the Tory beef war.

On the withholding tax, having accused me of being a puppet, of caving in and dancing to someone else's tune on beef, the right hon. Gentleman accuses me of being isolated—the very thing he asks me to be on beef, but for which he criticises me when I am. The right hon. Gentleman's biggest cheek came when he stated that we should have vetoed the withholding tax from the beginning because that is what the Tories did. Well, we have done some research on what they did: the tax arose from a decision taken in April 1996, and, on the previous occasion on which it was on the agenda, in 1989, Britain voted for it under a Conservative Government. The country that vetoed it then was Luxembourg. The Tories cannot tell us that we should have gone straight in with a veto.

The right hon. Gentleman also made some points on defence, a subject on which he is perhaps more ridiculous than on any other. If I understand his position, he is in favour of defence co-operation in Europe, but in a way consistent with NATO.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Inside NATO.

The Prime Minister: Inside NATO. In other words, he supports the European strategic defence initiative agreed by the Tories in 1996 at Berlin. Let me read out what the NATO summit of April 1999 said:

"We confirm that a stronger European role will help contribute to the vitality of our alliance for the 21st century."

The Deputy Secretary of State for the United States said:

"The US is for this. It is in our interests for Europe to be able to deal effectively".

The United States favours the European strategic defence initiative. Finally, let us hear what the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples)—the shadow Foreign Secretary—said in June:

"The relationship between British and French forces at an operational level is fantastic. It should be developed. We are the two most serious countries about defence in Europe . . . We need to do things together."—[*Official Report*, 10 June 1999; Vol. 332, c. 812.]

What has changed between then and now? Baroness Thatcher has brought the Tories to heel. All that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks is doing in the name

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of strength is actually weakness. By choosing not to stand up to the ultra-Thatcherites who run his party, he has taken a party that used—no matter what one's politics—to be a serious party of government and turned it into the equivalent of a religious sect. It is that error of judgment from which all his errors stem—on the renegotiation of the treaty of Rome that would give us an exit route from the EU; on blocking enlargement; or on the absurd positions that he has taken on every policy that relates to Europe. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Those on the Opposition Front Bench should know better.

The Prime Minister: We shall carry on with our sensible, positive and constructive relationship with Europe. That does not mean, and never has meant, that we shall fail to defend the national interest, but it means that we shall be unyielding when we need to be—as with the withholding tax—shall look for agreement where we can find it, and shall always be persuasive and sensible in our attitudes.

There will be times when we are in dispute with Europe—that happens with all countries—but not every dispute has to be a crisis. The British rebate, negotiated at Berlin in March—and kept—is an example of that. The Leader of the Opposition told us that we would get rolled over at Berlin and that the rebate would go, but we came back with the rebate intact and with the best deal on structural and cohesion funds that this country has ever had—we did it without handbagging anybody. We did it by taking a sensible attitude.

There may be—indeed there are—parts of our media and of the Conservative party who have such a violent dislike of Europe that they will abuse it and exaggerate its weaknesses to an absurd degree, but we will not let them dictate the policy on Europe. The Tory party can give in to them, but we will not, because in the name of defending Britain's national interest, they betray Britain's national interest.

We heard what we expected from the Leader of the Opposition. When we analyse the details of the policies that he proposes, we find that they are far removed from support for this country; they are a mixture of extremism and opportunism. This country prefers grown-up, sensible government.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I begin with the closing theme of the comments of the Leader of the Conservative party—isolationism. The majority of Members would readily concur—whatever the gradation or the spectrum of their views on matters European—that the one matter that should remain profoundly isolated from engagement with Europe is the current stance of the British Conservative party, which is deeply against our national interest.

I welcome what was said and the steps that will be followed, as a result of the Helsinki summit, in respect of the Russian position. The Government deserve support, as do the efforts of the European Union. Does the Prime Minister concur that that matter is an important test of the EU's ability to manifest a more constructive and coherent foreign policy approach to such a significant neighbour as Russia, which currently is behaving in such an outrageous fashion over humanitarian issues?

On defence, will the Prime Minister acknowledge that—despite all the hokum and nonsense about a European army—among those who take a more sensible and constructive interest in the matter, there will be a welcome for the modest but significant step towards the establishment of a European rapid reaction force? That is not least because it bolts us further into NATO and bolts a European component into NATO, which is essential for our long-term interest.

On the all-important issue of enlargement—especially in respect of Turkey—does the Prime Minister agree that a seminal decision was reached in principle in Helsinki? However, Europe must be emphatic that, while wanting to welcome Turkey into the European community of nations in due course, Turkey must respond by a significant improvement in its domestic human rights agenda. We should not lose sight of that simply because of the bigger and welcome aim of enlarging the union in that geographic direction.

As for our friends in France, the old alliance is under some strain at present—never mind relations between Mr. Jospin and the Prime Minister. The benefit of hindsight is a great thing. However, does the Prime Minister acknowledge, with hindsight, that, while dealing with the matter in the sane and sensible way that the Government have adopted during recent weeks, it might have been better to realise that the French could have reneged on the agreement that they appeared to have signed up to? In acknowledging that, we should not lose sight of the bigger truth: British beef exports are locked out of Commonwealth countries throughout the world. We are locked out of the United States. We have no legal recourse in any of these areas of the world.

The only reason that we have a legal recourse—it is not Britain versus France but the rest of Europe versus France in this matter—is that we are members of, and active participants in, the European Union. When the sceptics and the critics say that this is an argument for disengagement, there are those of us who will strongly make the case that it is an argument for more proactive engagement in Europe, and for using the mechanisms that Europe makes available to us to ensure that the undoubted unlawful activity of the French is brought to a speedy conclusion in due course and in our national interest.

Finally—[HON. MEMBERS: "Come on."] I acknowledge that Conservative Members find this boring, because they are not interested in rational dialogue about Europe across the Floor of the House. Long may they remain bored and impotent on matters European.

On the issue of the withholding tax, the Prime Minister said, tellingly but not altogether revealingly:

"I have made it clear that we will not permit that".

What does that mean? Does that mean, as far as the eurobond market is concerned, that he will be willing to exercise a British veto, come Oporto in June? It would be helpful if he would clarify that issue.

Finally—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): That is the second "finally."

Mr. Kennedy: I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is subjecting my words to such minute textual analysis. It is better than can be said of what the right hon. Gentleman has to say in matters European where the rest of the House is involved.

Will the Prime Minister none the less acknowledge that the mood music in terms of the summit was that Britain is clearly not playing the central leading role in Europe that it should? It cannot and it will not until Britain and the British Government are more unambiguous about our commitment to the single currency, and about being fully plugged into the European project as a whole.

The Prime Minister: On the right hon. Gentleman's final point, Britain was clearly playing a very central and leading role in the defence debate.

In relation to the euro, we have set out our position. In order for Britain to join the euro sensibly, the economic conditions must be met. Those conditions remain, and they are right and in this country's interests.

In respect of the right hon. Gentleman's comments on defence, we agree entirely that it is important to see the developments as an addition to our ability to affect issues in the right way. I know that some Conservatives have been saying, "Of course we want this, but only when it is within NATO." I do not think that they yet understand that this is actually building on the European security and defence initiative, so it is entirely consistent with NATO. Indeed, the force can be used by NATO, but it is then available to us to use it where the alliance

"as a whole is not engaged".

In other words, the alliance can decide that it will be engaged in a particular situation; but should, for example, America decide not to be engaged, we can have our own force in the limited tasks that are called Petersberg tasks—humanitarian, peacekeeping and peace intervention missions. Only a Conservative party utterly in thrall to the anti-Europeans could see that in a way that NATO does not see it, as was made clear by NATO's comments at the summit in April. *[Interruption.]* There was a shout about Strobe Talbott. In fact, he has given some very clear statements on it. He has said:

"It is in our interests for Europe to be able to deal effectively with challenges to European security well before they reach the threshold of triggering US combat involvement"—

not that it will make any difference to the Conservatives.

The right hon. Gentleman is right in what he says about enlargement. We have said that we very much welcome the fact that Turkey is a candidate country, but we have made it clear—and it is clear in the conclusions—that the Copenhagen criteria on human rights and democracy must be met before the accession negotiations get under way.

In respect of France, the right hon. Gentleman is also right. We are extremely disappointed at the French decision. That decision is wrong. It is wrong in law, and it is politically misguided and misjudged. However, it is important that we recognise that it is only because we are members of the European Union that we can sell beef in 13 of the 15 member states, that we are actually selling it now in five countries outside the European Union and that we are free to sell it outside the European Union. When we came to office, not merely was the beef ban in place in Europe, but we were banned from selling it in third countries as well—[HON. MEMBERS: "By Europe."] I do not want to get into that internal row in the Conservative party about which side of the fence it is on. It is important—*[Interruption.]* We have done enough of that.

It is important that we continue to persuade countries. I wish to make one point again: British beef is the safest in the world because we sell only animals that are under 30 months old and that were born after August 1996 when the new rules were implemented. They are the strictest rules on animal feeding anywhere in the world, and there has not been a single case of BSE in such an animal in this country. When other countries consider the incidence of BSE as a whole in this country, they fail to recognise that it occurs within older animals—the animals that we are not selling to other countries. I am afraid that we must recognise that we have a big job of persuading to do. Even when the beef ban is fully lifted, we shall still have to go out and really sell British beef. Of course, the right hon. Gentleman was right to point out that many Commonwealth countries and the United States of America have a ban in place on British beef.

In respect of the withholding tax, we have made it quite clear all the way through that we are prepared to use the veto if necessary. Countries such as Germany have perfectly legitimate concerns. They experience tax evasion on a significant scale because money simply goes across the border to countries where banking secrecy rules apply and where people can relieve themselves of their obligation to pay their proper tax in Germany. They want that stopped, and we are entirely sympathetic to that. However, as I have emphasised many times before, it must be done in such as way that it does not put at risk what is not just a major British and City of London interest, but a major European interest—namely, the eurobond market.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Just 10 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, 10 of the 13 countries recognised as applicants were members of either the Soviet empire or of the Soviet Union. Is that fact not a measure of the historic importance of the decisions that were taken at the Helsinki summit? To show that Europe recognises the importance of that, can my right hon. Friend give us an idea of the working assumptions or the target dates that he and his colleagues have set for the first batch of countries formally to join the European Union? If we do not grasp this historic opportunity, disillusion may well set in.

The Prime Minister: Of course, all the countries are treated the same and according to the same criteria. In a sense, it is up to them how ready they get. In the conclusions, we say that we would want to be ready ourselves to welcome them in by 2002 if they comply with the conditions of entry.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): In order to make progress on its application to join the European Union, has Turkey been required to undertake that it will withdraw its troops from northern Cyprus? Are we, Greece and Turkey going to continue as guarantors of the 1960 Cyprus constitution, or is that task going to be transferred to the European Union?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not a requirement or precondition for Turkey's accession, but general words in the conclusions of the communiqué make it clear that there is an obligation on people to do their best to resolve border disputes. We have also made it clear—this was welcomed by Cyprus and by Greece—that the resolution of the dispute in Cyprus cannot be a precondition to Cyprus's accession. The hon. Gentleman will find that

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most people recognise the importance of resolving the dispute, but do not want it to be a precondition on either the accession of Turkey or the accession of Cyprus.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Since the Prime Minister has confirmed to the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel) that there is now no obstacle to Cyprus being admitted to the European Union—provided, of course, that it complies with the appropriate conditions—will my right hon. Friend further confirm that it would, to say the very least, be anomalous if one country in the European Union had a third of its territory occupied by a country that is a candidate for EU membership? Will he confirm that pressure ought, therefore, to be placed on Turkey to withdraw those forces as soon as possible, under appropriate arrangements, and that the best thing that Turkey can do to advance its candidature will be to urge Rauf Denktas to make an appropriate agreement with the lawful Government of Cyprus?

The Prime Minister: The most helpful thing that I can say is that of course we want the dispute in Cyprus to be resolved. As I said, there is a general obligation on countries to do their best to resolve such disputes. Under the auspices of the UN, talks are being conducted between the respective parties in Cyprus, and I hope that they will be successful. At this stage, that is probably the most helpful and diplomatic thing for me to say.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): What benefit does the City derive from the Prime Minister's refusal to say that, if necessary, the Government will veto the withholding tax?

The Prime Minister: I have just that I would do that, so the City is probably not in the same state of ignorance as the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this European summit, like all European summits, was difficult and that he had vigorously to fight our corner? Is not that logical and inevitable in a Europe of nation states? Is not the alternative, of Britain being outside the European Union, a position in which we would have no leverage, no influence and no allies? Whether the beef ban, the withholding tax or defence co-operation were under discussion, our voice would count for nothing. Is not that the harsh, cold reality—a reality that the Conservative party does not even begin to address?

The Prime Minister: Of course all countries fight their corner on issues that affect their vital national interest, and this country should be no different from any other. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members shout that we have not done it very successfully, but I repeat that at the Berlin summit we got a better deal than any other country could possibly have got. We kept the rebate when everyone was saying that, on enlargement, we would have to give it up. The Leader of the Opposition and his colleagues were saying that we would negotiate away the rebate, but we did not. We kept it, and we added to that a good deal for objective 1 status and structural funds, and we did so in a way that did not isolate Britain from anybody. That, in my view, is the proper way to negotiate.

As a result of our negotiations, there is a change in the balance of contributions between Britain, France and Italy. Although we shall still be big net contributors, our contributions will, in future years, be far more in line with those of comparably sized countries. That is safeguarding our interests.

I remind the House that the Conservatives have been accusing me of being isolated on the withholding tax. I am not isolated, but if I were, it would be precisely because I am prepared to stand up for this country's interests. The Conservatives want me to do what they, as a party, now urge, because they have given in to the Thatcherites who, I am afraid, now run the party. That is why I draw a distinction between the way Margaret Thatcher negotiated for the first six or seven years of her premiership and the Conservatives' later negotiating position. Margaret Thatcher negotiated the single European market, and in the course of that she gave away the veto on more items than any Prime Minister before or since. She did so entirely justifiably because that was in Britain's interests. She took Britain into the exchange rate mechanism of the European monetary system.

All that tends to be forgotten, but it is true, and it was only in the later period of Conservative Government that Britain moved into a position of outright oppositionalism and obstructionism. It is a tragedy that the Conservative party forced the next Prime Minister—against his will, I believe—into a similar position, so that on BSE, the ban was imposed and we had a beef war, which is generally agreed to have been a rather humiliating spectacle for this country. I repeat: no matter how much parts of the media or of the Conservative party urge on me a similar course, I shall not pursue it. It is utterly bogus patriotism and it is pretending to stand up for this country's national interests when actually they would be undermined.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): When the Prime Minister reflects on Schröder's flouting of the single market on Mannesmann, and Jospin's flouting of European law on beef, as well as, indeed, his own isolation on the withholding tax, how does he assess progress towards the vision of Europe that he and Mr. Prodi share?

The Prime Minister: I am not aware that Chancellor Schröder has intervened in the single market. He is perfectly entitled to make his view clear. I have made it clear all the way through that I believe that the European market is right, and that that is how things should happen. It is curious that the right hon. Gentleman attacks me over these issues, because of course he would like to get out of the European Union altogether. He says to me that I should be doing better in the EU, but I am afraid that his mouth is not the one from which such sentiments should be uttered. That is the choice. It is the Conservative party's tragedy that, I am afraid, the right hon. Gentleman finds more support on the Opposition Benches today than I would ever have thought possible.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): The decision on Turkey will be greatly welcomed by most of the members of the Turkish Parliament, who are well aware of the concerns in western Europe over the future

of Cyprus, and want to enter the European Union as soon as is humanly possible. Furthermore, it will be a spur to those in the Turkish Parliament who want to implement an agenda of modernising Parliament, including changing the way in which it operates.

The Prime Minister: I wholeheartedly agree with that. Managing to secure this step forward is a great tribute to the Finnish presidency, which performed magnificently throughout its six months; to Turkey, for having acknowledged that the rest of the EU wants to involve it in the candidate status; and to Costas Simitis and the Greek Government, who had the courage to grasp the opportunity. They deserve our congratulations. It has long been our desire to see Turkey more closely involved in the EU. Such involvement is of very big strategic interest to this country and the EU.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Summits of this nature have their difficulties and successes and, in fairness, the Prime Minister has emerged quite well from a very difficult weekend. On the withholding tax, he has stood firm—contrary to the suggestions of some. On Turkey, he has taken a lead that many of us welcome. As one who has taken an interest in Turkey and Cyprus for the past 25 years, I welcome the decision in Helsinki. Will the Prime Minister commend the Finnish presidency for the way in which it handled the matter? I see the different nuances of statements on Cyprus; I can read between the lines and I welcome the change in our Government policy on Cyprus.

Coming from an agricultural constituency, I am obviously very disappointed at the French approach to the beef issue. However, one cannot stop people breaking the law—that is the problem—and they are breaking the law. Now that the matter is going into court and will probably take about 18 months to resolve, will the Prime Minister support the UK beef industry in any claim for damages that may arise following the Court's decision? The Prime Minister mentioned 13 countries, but we cannot really get into Italy because we would have to go through France. Therefore, a beef claim could be built, and will need support.

The summit commended the political process in Northern Ireland and asked for the implementation of the Good Friday agreement in its totality. Did all those present realise that that meant the complete disarmament of all illegal arms in Northern Ireland by May next year?

The Prime Minister: On the latter point, people are very familiar with the detail of the agreement and the need for all of it to be implemented.

In respect of beef, we would of course support UK farmers in their claims for compensation. There has been a transit agreement with France, so we should manage to transport beef through France en route to other countries. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the French are breaking the law; they have broken the law. We were right to try to persuade them not to do so because that would have been better for our farmers. As more sensible people understand, getting there by persuasion is more likely to sell beef than doing so simply under court order.

In respect of Turkey, I fully agree with the right hon. Gentleman, who has a long-standing interest in the matter. The decision potentially opens the door to a new era in relations with Turkey.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): On the interdepartmental conference, will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that not only will Ministers report back to the House on progress, but that, when draft proposals are tabled at the conference, they will also be put to the House, so that they can be debated in the House before they are agreed, and not debated only after they have become a fait accompli?

The Prime Minister: We shall keep the House informed in the usual way. Any treaty changes that require the force of law will have to come before the House.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): I happen to agree with the Prime Minister that the strength of the European Union when there is an internal dispute is that we have the benefit of supranational institutions such as the European Court. That is why no serious politician would ever advocate withdrawal. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman regrets having done so in 1983.

On defence, can the Prime Minister clarify the discussions that he had with the new applicants? It is clear that the European Union is expanding well beyond the remit of NATO. It is therefore essential that the EU has some military ability to react in circumstances in which there may be a threat to any future member country, which may not automatically engage American interest. In a sense, membership of the European Union is a security guarantee.

The Prime Minister: Most of the applicant countries rightly see their future in NATO. As we have always made clear, we see NATO as the cornerstone of our own defence. It is important to emphasise that the purpose of the defence identity or defence initiative is to allow us to act in certain circumstances, where there is consent—each country would have to consent to act in a particular way.

The force that we are discussing is confined to what are called the Petersberg tasks—the tasks defined in a strictly limited way in relation to humanitarian or peacekeeping objectives. No one seriously believes that, if an issue such as Kosovo comes up again, we will not want to act with NATO. The proposed force also gives us the ability to put right something that Kosovo laid bare—the lack of proper capability in many of the European defence forces, although probably less so in the British defence forces than in those of most other countries. Although large numbers of forces were available in theory, in practice, we did not have large numbers of forces that could do the type of work that was required. That has greatly stimulated people to ask whether we have the right capability. We, for example, are asking questions about strategic lift and whether we have the capability in that respect. That is entirely sensible.

It is unfortunate that that has become a party issue between us, because it builds precisely on the work that the previous Prime Minister did at Berlin in 1996. To set that hare running, as the shadow Defence Minister, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), did by going over to the United

[The Prime Minister]

States and saying that it is an attempt to break up NATO, is not just wrong, but fundamentally misguided. In the end, it does this country no favours at all.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On Kosovo, where the Prime Minister says that we did not have sufficient capability, when Bernard Kouchner was asked what was needed, he replied, "Money, money, money; police, police, police." Was the parlous situation of winter in the Balkans discussed at Helsinki? In particular, did anybody at Helsinki have any idea how the Danube could be unblocked without the unpalatable prospect of talking to Mr. Milosevic?

The Prime Minister: We have always wanted the Danube to be unblocked, but we are not prepared to start trading with Milosevic the things that he wants. Kosovo was discussed at length at the summit. My hon. Friend is right to say that Mr. Kouchner is making it clear what he needs. He needs armed police, incidentally, which is why the Royal Ulster Constabulary has willingly offered to help.

As for money, we are playing our part substantially. It is right, however, that other countries must realise that our obligation to Kosovo has not ended; it continues. In particular, we agreed that we would consider ways of pushing on the entire stability pact process for the region. That is also immensely important. The countries involved will require a great deal of reconstruction to survive the next few years.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): In the presidency conclusions to which both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence referred, there is mention of

"determination to develop an autonomous capacity to take decisions and . . . EU-led military operations in response to international crises."

The right hon. Gentleman has said that each of the member states would be able to consent. Does he accept that, under the Petersberg tasks to which all this relates, including a wider defence policy, majority voting applies where a joint strategy and a common action have already been devolved? Does he also accept that, in plain English, as in the Oxford dictionary, "autonomous" means "self-governing" or "independent"?

As for strengthening NATO, there can be no serious doubt that that wider defence policy is causing enormous concern in the United States and enormous enthusiasm in Russia.

The Prime Minister: As ever, the hon. Gentleman is seeing conspiracies where none exists. The full sentence from which he has quoted in part is in paragraph 27. It reads:

"The European Council underlines its determination to develop an autonomous capacity to take decisions and, where NATO as a whole is not engaged, to launch and conduct EU-led military operations."

There is no way in which any country will give up control over its own armed forces. The European Commission and Parliament are not involved in any way. This is where NATO does not wish to be engaged, or where America for any reason does not want to be engaged.

Mr. Cash: Autonomous.

The Prime Minister: It is autonomous in circumstances where the alliance as a whole does not wish to be engaged. If the hon. Gentleman reads further, he will see that the document refers to forces

"capable of the full range of Petersberg tasks."

Those are specific and limited tasks.

Mr. Cash: Majority voting.

The Prime Minister: It is not majority voting. No country has any intention of giving over its armed forces or defence to another country. I would not do that on behalf of this country and neither would any other country do it on behalf of its armed forces.

The hon. Gentleman talks about huge concern in the United States. There has been some concern, which has been mainly prompted by senior Conservatives going to the United States and talking complete nonsense. *[Interruption.]* If I remember correctly, if, in the old days, Labour party spokesmen had started attacking this country's defence policy abroad, the Conservative Government would have had our flesh hanging in strips off the rafters.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I agree with the general thrust of my right hon. Friend's remarks on Turkey. However, may I emphasise again that there are serious human rights concerns about Turkey's candidacy? I have recently written to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary expressing some of those concerns. Torture is a daily occurrence and freedom of expression, especially for Kurds, is non-existent. Several Kurdish Members of Parliament are still in prison, including one woman who is very unwell. If the death penalty were to be lifted, that would be a consideration. However, it is time that the Turks treated the Kurds as human beings and not something less.

The Prime Minister: I cannot share all my hon. Friend's sentiments but I say to her that it is precisely to meet legitimate concerns that it was made clear that the accession negotiations do not begin until the Copenhagen criteria on human rights and democracy are met. I think that that is a pretty good guarantee.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Given the hostile nature of France's actions towards this country in recent weeks, why was the Foreign Secretary seen on television last week cuddling the French Prime Minister in Helsinki?

The Prime Minister: That requires a delicate answer. I think that the hon. Gentleman really means that to be a serious question. If anything is an indication of what is happening to the Conservative party, it is that question.

Mr. Ben Chapman (Wirral, South): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Turkey's road to candidature has

been long and sometimes disappointing? Does he also agree that Turkey's accession is important not only because it is a secular democracy, a valuable geopolitical power in a troubled region, an important ally and partner in NATO, WEU and the Council of Europe, and our bilateral relations are good but because the candidature process involves it in opportunities and obligations?

The Prime Minister: I fully agree. It is interesting that the step forward with Turkey has been greeted well in both Greece and Turkey. It is unusual for that to happen. My hon. Friend is right to point out that Turkey is a valuable NATO ally.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): As it is patently obvious that the rules and arrangements for a Europe of 15 cannot function in a Europe of 25 or 26, what confidence can we have that the intergovernmental conference next year will tackle the matter with greater urgency and efficiency than the Amsterdam conference, which was a total cop-out?

The Prime Minister: It is right that the so-called Amsterdam left-overs are important. We must tackle them, or we cannot make enlargement or a properly functioning European Union a reality. We have already made it clear that we want to maintain a veto on key matters such as defence, treaty change and taxation. However, we must also be prepared to take a view of the European Union that allows decisions to be made in the enlarged body; otherwise, we, as well as the European Union, will be the losers.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is not it a fact that, while there is justified concern—which I have shared for many years—about Turkey's human rights record, Turkey has, for a long time, successfully resisted all attempts to turn the country into a fundamentalist state where no human rights would exist? Is there not a far better chance for the improvement of human rights in Turkey if that country is a serious candidate for European Union membership?

The Prime Minister: That must be right. It is the reason for our strong support of the initiative that the Finnish presidency has succeeded in pulling off.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Although I do not believe that I have ever been accused of being a Thatcherite—certainly not in the ignorant way in which the Prime Minister habitually uses that epithet—does he understand that, while the proposed withholding tax poses a serious threat to the City of London, and must be resisted—I congratulate him on the vigour with which he resists it—it is only the tip of the much larger iceberg of general tax harmonisation? Will he accept that the leaders of the European Union believe, almost unanimously, that the single currency will not work until there is general tax harmonisation? If Britain were included in that, our taxation rates would be much higher, and comparable with those of Germany. Many Germans, at every level of prosperity, are trying to get their money out of the country because of the high rate of German taxation.

The Prime Minister: It is simply not right to say that the rest of Europe is in favour of tax harmonisation. Even if there were a substantial body of opinion in favour, the proper role for Britain would be to get into the argument and stop it, and we could not do that if we were removed to the margins of Europe. The hon. Gentleman put his question to me in a fair way; let me put it back to him. If I were to adopt the position that his leader has urged on me and say in relation to next year's intergovernmental conference that I would block enlargement unless we agreed a clause on flexibility—which no other European country would agree to, and which would not be in our interests anyway—I would lose any influence I had in Europe whatever. I would then face the choice of either complete humiliation, because none of the other countries would agree to that, so I would have to withdraw my block on enlargement, or blocking enlargement, in which case I can tell him that the arguments in respect of Britain would be gone altogether.

Defence is another example. The defence initiative was not invented when we came to office; it already existed as part of earlier treaties agreed to by the Conservatives. We have made sure—and we will make sure, because I shall not agree to it otherwise—that defence policy is made in such a way that it is fully consistent with NATO and does not undermine it in any shape or form. If the British voice were not there arguing that case, Britain would be worse off.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the best ways to help the people of Chechnya is to provide maximum assistance to the Russian authorities in combating the international financial crime and money laundering that lie at the root of so much of the terrorism that the Russians fear from the Chechens?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, which is why we have to choose with care what instruments we use to try to put pressure on Russia in this situation. For example, we have agreed that some provisions of the partnership and co-operation agreement should be suspended as a result of what is happening in Chechnya, but he is quite right to say that we would be misguided if we tried to undermine our memorandum of understanding with the Russians in respect of organised crime and money laundering because it helps us to try to sort out the situation in Russia. We understand the concerns that Russia and the Russian people have about terrorism, but nothing can justify a disproportionate response in Chechnya.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): During the discussions in Helsinki about collective European defence, what was said about the size of our national defence budgets? Is the Prime Minister aware that the United States of America spends nearly 4 per cent. of gross domestic product on defence and this year has increased its budget by 10 per cent. while in Europe the figure is 2.2 per cent. of GDP and falling, as member states scramble to maintain the convergence criteria for the euro? If he wants to give a lead in Europe, should not Britain set an example by increasing its defence budget to overcome the problems of overstretch and to bear a fairer share of the burden of collective defence in NATO?

The Prime Minister: The constraint on defence budgets is nothing to do with euro convergence; it is to do with public spending discipline. Like any other country, we have to remain disciplined in our approach to public spending. The hon. Gentleman is right in a sense, however, because the whole purpose of the initiative is to get European countries including Britain—although Britain probably has less to do than most—to consider what they are spending money on and whether it is being spent wisely. He may be right about the 2.2 per cent., although I do not know the precise figure, but the plain fact of the matter is that although, some countries are spending that much, or in some cases more, if one analyses the defence capability that they achieve as a result, one sees that it is not as impressive as it should be, even for such spending.

The Americans should support the initiative, done properly, because a common complaint of theirs, which they make with some justification, is that Europe expects America to bear the entire burden of defence spending. I am saying that we need a better relationship in which we analyse and improve our own capability and make sure that it can do what we want it to do while remaining entirely knitted together with America on the key NATO issues.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am afraid that we must move on. There is other important business to protect.

Point of Order

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. During the debate on transport on 8 December, the Deputy Prime Minister said, at column 837 of *Hansard*, among other places, that his view was that Conservative members of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee wholeheartedly supported his Bill to establish the Strategic Rail Authority. That is quite incorrect. The report to which he referred makes it plain in paragraph 5 on page viii that the official Opposition wholeheartedly oppose the establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority.

Has the right hon. Gentleman indicated his intention to come to the House to correct that misleading statement? Is there any procedural rule to protect the rights of Back Benchers on pre-legislative hearings of Select Committees who, although perhaps perfectly content to allow a report to be unanimous, none the less want to protect their own position as members of Her Majesty's official Opposition?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his intention to raise that point of order, but he must know that this is a matter for interpretation and debate. The Chair has no knowledge that the Deputy Prime Minister is intending to make a statement, but the Transport Bill is due to be debated and that will provide an opportunity for matters of argument and interpretation to be determined.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(2) (European Standing Committees),

FISHERIES

That the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum, submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 5th December 1999, relating to the fixing of fishing opportunities for 2000 and certain conditions under which they may be fished, shall not stand referred to European Standing Committee A.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) shall not apply to any proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to fisheries, and the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of those proceedings not later than Seven o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Fisheries

[Relevant document: European Union Document No. 7542/99 concerning the Commission's report to the Council and the European Parliament on the results of the multi-annual guidance programme for the fishing fleet at the end of 1997.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I should make it clear to the House that the Speaker has selected both the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and that in the name of the leader of the Liberal Democrat party.

4.41 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum, submitted by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 5th December 1999, relating to the fixing of fishing opportunities for 2000 and certain conditions under which they may be fished; recognises that many fish stocks remain in poor shape and need to be rebuilt for the future; and supports the Government's intention to negotiate the best possible fishing opportunities for UK fishermen consistent with the sustainable management of stocks, effective enforcement and the need to ensure that the regional differences of fisheries and their communities are fully recognised.

It is traditional to hold a fisheries debate each year before the December Agriculture Council to decide total allowable catches and quotas for the following year. It will be an important debate this year, given the recommendations of the International Council for Exploration of the Seas and of the Commission. This is an important occasion for Members from fishing constituencies and for those with a general interest in fisheries. Although total allowable catches and quotas are the main subjects, the debate enables hon. Members to focus on wider issues. I should like to touch on some of the problems that have affected the fishing industry over the past year, and to look ahead to some of the important questions for the future.

This year, the Select Committee on Agriculture produced a report on sea fisheries. I pay tribute to the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), and its members for producing a thoughtful and well-constructed report that adds to the debate on fisheries. Although I regret that the debate has been cut short by the statement, I was pleased that, under the new procedures that have been introduced in the House, we were able to have a three-hour debate on the Agriculture Committee report. That was a useful innovation.

I want to begin by saying a word about the science behind the setting of this year's TACs. There is a debate about the science and the way in which it is applied. Fishermen have views on that, as hon. Members can quite understand. I am keen that there should be a greater exchange of information between scientists and fishermen.

This autumn, the chairman of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations went to sea on the MAFF research vessel, and saw the detail and quality of the work that our scientists do. The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science has regularly contributed articles on fishing science to *Fishing News*, which enables the industry to read about the scientific work and the calculations on fish stocks, and to comment on them. CEFAS scientists have visited fishing ports and have had useful meetings with fishermen. In the coming year, we want to discuss with the industry how to build on those contacts and put them on a more systematic basis.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): We all want a closer relationship between fishermen and scientists. I hope that the Minister will pursue this matter with great vigour, given the Canadian experience. Despite specific warnings from the scientists, fishermen in Canada said that there were plenty of fish right up until the last one disappeared from the grand banks. It is important to be careful when considering the anecdotal evidence in this area.

Mr. Morley: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point. We must ensure that we have a proper scientific basis for the assessment of fish stocks. That is not to say, however, that fishermen do not have valuable information to contribute. We want to work with them to develop that. The fisheries conservation group enables fishermen, scientists and fisheries managers to meet to consider and develop practical conservation measures. Some helpful measures have resulted, which I consider to be to the advantage of fisheries management. We want to develop that further.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): May I explain why the Minister was given such a hard time when he visited my constituency last week, and was roughed up by the fishermen? They cannot understand why, despite the conservation measures, they are having to throw more fish overboard—having caught them dead—than they are managing to land in their own ports. Is the Minister aware that there is now a sea lion epidemic? Sea lions are coming from all over the north of Scotland and beyond to find the dead fish, and to catch live fish as well. That is why the quota goes down by 30 per cent. each year. The quota system is madness: the Minister should get rid of it.

Mr. Morley: I did not know that there were so many discards that sea lions are coming all the way from the south Atlantic to the British Isles to eat the fish. Nevertheless, discards are an important issue.

I was sorry that the hon. Gentleman could not join me at the meeting in Brixham. The fishermen did not "rough me up", although they made their point robustly, as would be expected. I thought that the meeting provided a useful opportunity to hear both sides of the argument. The fishermen allowed me, with some courtesy, to make my points and to answer their questions. I have no objection to the holding of such meetings elsewhere, to enable fishermen to discuss the issues at first hand.

Time is being squeezed. Although I find it difficult to resist interventions from Members who are interested in this topic, I want to say what I have to say as quickly as possible, in order to provide the maximum opportunity for Back Benchers to speak.

Let me say something about this year's total allowable catches and quotas. The scientific advice relating to most of the stocks that we are considering is depressing: there is no doubt that many stocks are under pressure. The North sea cod quota has not been taken up this year,

[Mr. Morley]

because the fish are not there to be caught. Monkfish are another example, and many round-fish stocks in the Irish sea are under considerable pressure. The resulting quota cuts proposed by the Commission have been described as the most drastic for 10 years, and we must think carefully about the consequences to the fishing industry.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Will the Minister be invoking the Hague preference for, say, cod in the North sea and monkfish in the western Scottish waters?

Mr. Morley: We intend to invoke a preference in regard to certain stocks when we consider it to be in our national interest. That applies to a range of stocks, and we need to give the matter some thought. As the hon. Gentleman may know, I am scheduled to meet representatives of the fishing industry this week, before I go to the Council of Ministers. I shall have an opportunity to discuss the preference then.

We need to take scientific advice seriously. It is provided in good faith by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas, after thorough stock assessment and analysis. Some criticise the work of ICES because they do not like the implications of its proposals, but we cannot shoot the messenger because we do not like the message. Fisheries scientists do not have an easy job, but they address it professionally and are committed to it. We should recognise that. To be fair to the industry, some industry groups have pressed us on the need to respect the scientific advice on next year's TACs.

Nor should we blame the extent of the cuts proposed on the need for a precautionary approach. Significant cuts are required regardless of that approach, because many of our key stocks are in extremely poor shape. Some are at such low levels that they are over-dependent on the strength of incoming recruitment, which varies for natural reasons. As a result, the size of catches in the following year can vary significantly. It is not just a case of pressure on stocks, although that may obtain in some cases; there is also the question of natural cycles—for instance, the seven-year cycle applying to cod. Two poor year classes in 1997 and 1998 mean that current catch levels are already well down, with little prospect of improvement in the next couple of years. The number of young fish recruiting to the fishery in 1998 was by the far lowest in more than 30 years. In those circumstances, a deep cut in the TAC for next year will be inevitable and, indeed, essential if stock is to be conserved and rebuilt.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): How can the Minister square what he has just said with the fact that, at Brixham last week, he made the point that he personally completely opposed the reduction of some minimum landing sizes and the abolition of others? After everything he said in opposition, is he going to justify pictures of 45 million dead fish floating in the sea because they have been discarded under the common fisheries policy?

Mr. Morley: I have made it clear that I take seriously the issue of discards. I also take minimum landing size reductions seriously. We cannot overestimate the discards issue. Many discards are the result of normal fishing practice, with undersized and unmarketable fish being caught. It is true that, when we have quota management, some marketable fish will be caught and discarded. That is one of the undesirable side effects of quota management, but the problem is to do not simply with the common fisheries policy, which is often blamed, but with the available quotas. The south-west is a case in point. Apart from the fact that the original quotas were based on the track record before the CFP and that more fish is caught and landed now, the quota has gone down in the non-sector. Boats have moved from the non-sector to producer organisations, taking their quota with them, and that has a knock-on consequence.

I said to fishermen in Brixham, "What is the alternative in those circumstances?" We have to manage a quota. Some fishermen may be catching fish accidentally and cannot stop. Some may be deliberately targeting fish. If we do not have such management, how do we control the effect on those stocks?

The answer from the fishermen was that I was the Minister and it was for me to sort such things out. No solution was forthcoming because there is no easy solution. There may be some alternatives to quota management, but all have advantages and disadvantages. With some of the more attractive ones, such as multi-annual quota, stocks have to be in good shape before they can be applied.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): These things have to be looked at with some care. In certain areas—for example, cod in the North sea—people would agree that the stock is in a serious condition; it is difficult to argue against that. There is also the fact that the North sea settlement is boxed in by arrangements that the Minister has made with Norway, but, given his knowledge of the industry, is he really going to say that he is totally satisfied that the reduction in the quota for monkfish and saithe in the west coast of Scotland will not result—if it stands—in a substantial increase in discards of some of the most valuable species? Can he give us some assurance that he is aware of the underlying questions that I am talking about? Will he look at the west coast quotas very carefully in the negotiations?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. There is a problem with stocks of west coast saithe, although I accept that there is the issue of by-catch and potential discards. That needs to be considered. There is also a problem in relation to monkfish, which is more of a targeted fishery. Nevertheless, such problems do arise. I assure him that I will consider them.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): The Norwegians made their characteristic demand for an increase in North sea mackerel. Not many of our fishermen go to Norwegian or Greenland waters, but is my hon. Friend satisfied that those few vessels will get a fair share of the fish in those northern waters?

Mr. Morley: Yes. My hon. Friend, who knows the industry well and has long experience of it, makes a good point. By and large, there was a good outcome for the United Kingdom industry from the Atlanto-Scandian discussions on stocks such as mackerel. We got a good deal on mackerel and increased access in the western waters. We improved the position in relation to haddock, and that will help those who fish in the North sea as well, so those issues were dealt with.

I think that the overall outcome was not a bad one, although some of the agreed cod figures—not in United Kingdom waters—were probably higher than they should have been. We might like to re-examine that matter.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Morley: I shall, but only because the hon. Gentleman has fishing interests. I should like to make some progress.

Mr. Townend: Is there not some discrepancy between the figures that the scientists are working on this year and MAFF figures? For example, according to MAFF figures we have landed about 60 per cent. of our cod quota, whereas according to EU scientists almost the whole of the EU quota has already been taken. According to MAFF, we have landed about 55 per cent. of our plaice quota, whereas according to the scientists 125 per cent. of the EU quota has been caught. Therefore, either the scientists' figures are wrong or many of our European partners are enormously overfishing their quotas.

Mr. Morley: No, any difference is not due to the latter reason. Although the hon. Gentleman is right that the scientists' figures are higher than the landing figures, there are reasons for that difference, and also for the way in which the scientists make their calculations. A couple of weeks ago, when we met fishermen's leaders, we went through that issue. I should also caution the hon. Gentleman on one point: the logic is such that if actual landings are lower than those that the scientists calculate as possible, stocks may be in an even worse state than the scientists have calculated. Nevertheless, I understand the point. The issue has been addressed and, as I said, there will be an opportunity to discuss it further at the meeting.

We have to recognise the science and the fact that—for a variety of reasons, as I said—some of the stocks are in poor shape. However, we also cannot ignore the socio-economic consequences for the industry. Therefore, we have to examine the science and identify possible room for manoeuvre, while taking into account and trying to minimise effects on the industry. That is what we shall be trying to do when we meet in Brussels to discuss the issue. As I said, we have kept in close touch with the industry. This week, before we go to Brussels, there will be an opportunity to go through the issue again. I shall, of course, be listening very carefully to what the industry has to say.

There is no doubt that we have to institute recovery plans for some stocks, such as cod stocks in the Irish sea. The advice is that they are in such a bad state that only "the lowest possible" level of fishing should be allowed and a recovery programme put in place. Consequently, the Commission has proposed a 70 per cent. cut in the cod TAC and big cuts for haddock and whiting—which also feature in that mixed fishery. The cut is much bigger than the Commission would usually recommend—it tries to propose cuts of no more than 40 per cent.—but it has done so because of the potential consequences to the industry. Because of the size of the cuts, we shall have to examine the matter very closely.

I am convinced, however, that there is a need to develop and implement a recovery programme if those stocks are to have any chance of returning to sustainable levels. We have had informal exploratory contacts with the Commission and Ireland, and both agree on the need for exceptional measures, including technical conservation and for EU commitment to early action. I am also committed to ensuring that we make progress on the matter in consultation with the industry. We are also investigating ways of establishing a regional forum in the Irish sea, bringing together all those who are interested in that fishery. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) has previously advocated such a forum, and we should like to make progress in establishing one.

Devolution—to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and now to the Northern Ireland Assembly—has been introduced in 1999, and fisheries management is one of the spheres that have been devolved. Much time and thought were given in preparing devolution of fisheries management, and we have agreed various bilateral fisheries concordats as part of the general system of bilateral concordats between the Westminster Government and the devolved Administrations. The concordats are being published and made available for people to inspect. We should like, eventually, to establish a concordat on fisheries management with the Northern Ireland Administration.

I am particularly pleased with the excellent relations that have been forged between the Ministry and the new Scottish Executive, from ministerial to official level. The best example of those relations are perhaps in the Fisheries Councils, where I have been ably assisted by the Scottish Fisheries Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson), as a member of the United Kingdom team.

In the same vein, I look forward to welcoming Brid Rodgers, the new Northern Ireland Fisheries Minister, who will be on board at the Council later this week. Brid Rodgers will be joining the discussions that we shall have with the industry, as there are particular issues of concern for Northern Ireland fishermen, as there are for Scottish, Welsh and English fishermen.

Last month, I had the pleasure of opening the new London headquarters of the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission—NEAFC. I was honoured to be accompanied by Commissioner Fischler as well as Fisheries Ministers from Norway, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. NEAFC is an organisation which has come of age and is exercising an increasing influence over the management of fish stocks in the international waters of the north-east Atlantic. It now regulates redfish, mackerel, blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring stocks. A comprehensive new control and enforcement scheme has recently come into effect. We shall be playing a full role in the organisation.

There are two further issues I am particularly keen for NEAFC to get to grips with. The first is the expanding unregulated fishing for haddock by Russian and Icelandic vessels in the Rockall area. That risks undermining Community conservation measures to protect the stock. It is also unfair to UK and other EU fishermen who respect TAC limits when others do not. At the UK's instigation, the European Commission has served notice that that fishery must be brought under control. If it is not, we shall seek appropriate measures in NEAFC to deal with the problem.

The second issue is the management of the slow-growing, deep-water stocks, which experience elsewhere in the world has shown to be particularly

[Mr. Morley]

vulnerable to overfishing. Last year, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea urged that fisheries for those stocks in the north-east Atlantic should be brought under better management. The UK pressed for the issue to be raised in NEAFC. Unfortunately, a Community proposal for an immediate freeze on fishing effort on those stocks was not acceptable to certain NEAFC members. However, I hope that suitable measures will be adopted next year, once further advice has been received from ICES on management options.

New minimum landing sizes for plaice and other species come into effect in January. Several hon. Members have expressed concern about those regulations—including my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), who mentioned their effect on his local fishermen in Lowestoft. The changes have been introduced on the basis that reducing the minimum landing size reduces discards. There is some truth in that argument, but we believe that the proposals are not the right way forward because they send the wrong conservation message to the industry. It is better to address the issue of discards through conservation measures, perhaps by introducing bigger mesh sizes, rather than by reducing minimum landing sizes. We shall continue to oppose the proposals, because they are the wrong way forward.

Although we are dealing with an EU regulation, we have the right to apply a higher minimum landing size as a national measure in the UK. Other member states have expressed concern about the new measure and may consider doing the same. I want to discuss that with those member states, including Holland, to see whether it would be in the interests of our fishermen and our industry to apply different landing sizes from those in the European regulation.

Mr. Nicholls: I think that the Minister will at least give me credit for the fact that I have always been prepared to criticise his predecessors from my party as much as I criticise him. Will he at least assure us that there will be no question of agreeing to extra restrictions being imposed on our fishermen if they are not imposed on those from other nations who could be fishing in our area? If not, those who are practising conservation will not receive the benefit of it.

Mr. Morley: I want to apply measures in such a way that the benefit goes to our fishermen. The new limit has been agreed in the Council by a majority decision, so I cannot apply a higher measure to other member states who want to abide by the European directive, but our fishermen are telling me that they do not consider a catch of that size to be marketable. They also do not consider it good for conservation. If our industry tells us in consultation that we should apply our own rules, we must consider that. Other countries may make similar unilateral decisions. I am prepared to discuss that option with the industry.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister agree that haddock is the stock about which we are talking? As we catch about 78 per cent. of the relevant stock, the survival or otherwise of the haddock is in the hands of our fishermen. If our fishermen say that they would like special conservation measures, does not it make sense to grant them?

Mr. Morley: A number of helpful suggestions on conservation have come from our industry. In many cases, it would be better to apply measures on an EU-wide basis—there are no two ways about it, and that is a priority. In other cases, there may well be measures that we could apply in the UK that would benefit our industry, and we should not rule that out.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I have provided the Minister with proof positive that undersized fish are landed and sold openly in Spain. Have the British Government ever tried to bring enforcement proceedings against the Spaniards for allowing the landing of undersized fish? Is that not a failure of their inspectorate?

Mr. Morley: Making sure that each member state complies with European regulations is a matter for the Commission. We have argued consistently within the Council of Ministers that control measures should be applied properly across all member states. I believe that we are making progress on the new control measures, and that genuine efforts are being made by countries such as Spain in tackling what they admit is a problem with undersized fish. They are tackling that through market controls—and, from their point of view, that is the right way to do it.

We have been developing an interchange between our inspectors and those of other countries, including Spain. Our inspectors have been to Spain, in the company of Spanish inspectors, and their inspectors have been to the UK in the company of our inspectors. Recently, I was pleased to address a conservation course run by the sea fish inspectorate, which included a Spanish and a Norwegian inspector. It was useful to have them involved in a course run by our UK administration, and it was useful to listen to their experience and ideas. We are trying to develop better national and international management and to make sure that each EU country applies the same regulations to the same standards. We take that very seriously.

Mr. Gummer: Will the Minister consider building on the decision of Baroness Thatcher, when she was in office, to support an international inspectorate in the EU, and consider enabling that inspectorate to make unannounced visits to ports? Until that happens, it cannot do the job properly. Until now, the UK Government have been least happy about that, so it seems to be entirely in our interests if the inspectorate were to have that power.

Mr. Morley: I am glad to report to the right hon. Gentleman that we have reached agreement this year. The new control measures include the right of the Commission's inspectors to make unannounced visits to any member state fishing port, accompanied by the inspectors of that member state. That is the right way forward and we support it strongly.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Fishermen in the south-west, and Cornwall in particular, view with dismay the proposal to reduce the minimum landing size for megrim. As the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill)

pointed out, the Spanish market has a particular taste for immature and small fish. All this measure will do is to encourage that market, which I understand—as does the Select Committee on Agriculture, following its visit to Spain—the Spanish authorities are trying to stamp out.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is right that Spain and other member states are seriously addressing this issue, as it is in no one's interests to have a market in undersized, immature fish which have not had a chance to breed. Our industry does not want to catch such fish, not only for conservation reasons—which they take seriously—but for marketing reasons, such as demand and maximising prices. That is why it may be in the interests of our industry to take steps which benefit other markets and fishing patterns. As I said, we should not rule that out and I am prepared to consider it.

Mr. Steen: I am having difficulty understanding the problem. If the Minister believes that conservation and quotas are important, how can he justify the fact that sometimes, when fish of a certain species are caught, all of them have to be thrown overboard? Would not the simplest way to deal with the problem be to stop that happening, as dead fish do not need to be conserved? I mentioned sea lions earlier, but seals rushing down from the north kill live fish and eat dead ones. However, apparently they are not a conservation problem as there are plenty of fish and no quotas are needed. Why does not the Minister deal with that issue?

Mr. Morley: We cannot look for scapegoats for problems that we have inflicted on the seas. I do not suggest that seals do not have an impact, and the hon. Gentleman mentions issues that need to be examined carefully. Research programmes are currently looking into seal numbers and population dynamics, and the food chain and food web in which they are involved.

However, the problem with discards stems from the difficulty of managing a fishery where there are many species whose quotas are exhausted. How do we prevent such a fishery from being deliberately targeted? I accept that it is impossible for fishermen not to catch certain species even when their quotas are exhausted. That is where discards come in, but experienced fishermen know how to target certain species within the limits that are set. That is another reason for the management system that is in place.

I would be the first to accept that the system is not perfect. As I have made clear to the industry, I am more than willing to consider options and different ways to manage quotas, but they must be managed for conservation and sustainability. As we have discovered, it is neither simple nor easy to find alternatives.

Mr. Townend: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: No. I have given way to the hon. Gentleman once already and I want to make progress.

I shall not go into great detail about the common fisheries policy review in 2002, as there will be other opportunities to discuss what is a very large issue. Suffice it to say that we recognise that the CFP is not perfect and, indeed, has a number of serious flaws. We believe that it can be improved, but not simply by abolishing a fisheries policy designed to manage stocks in all European waters. That must remain an important element of the policy, but we want the CFP to adopt a more rational approach with more regional management and greater flexibility.

I am glad to say that I was encouraged by the very sensible approach to CFP reform displayed, in our recent talks, by Franz Fischler, the new Fisheries Commissioner. He certainly had a good grasp of the problems involved. We are also talking informally to other countries with a common interest in CFP reform, especially in connection with the regional issue. Some of the responses have been very encouraging, which shows that progress will be possible in some areas.

Earlier, I touched on the very good report from the Agriculture Committee. I shall not go into detail about that, other than to say that we are trying to act on its recommendations.

This year, we have brought in some new technical conservation measures, one of which will provide better protection for shellfish stocks. Another measure—introduced unilaterally, but strongly supported by the UK industry—imposes limits on catches of bass in the south-west of either 5 tonnes a week or 15 tonnes a month. Incidentally, France applied those limits unilaterally long before we did. The move has been warmly welcomed by all concerned, and it is an example of how local action can be taken. I should mention also that the organisation representing fishermen in the south-west applied that measure unilaterally before we introduced it.

Mr. Andrew George: At the time of the consultation, the Minister did not propose a 15-tonne-a-month option. That has not gone down well in the south-west and around the Cornish coast, and I think that the hon. Gentleman understands why.

Mr. Morley: I do understand why, but I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider what I am about to say. Of course, we discussed with the Scottish Parliament the impact that such a measure would have on Scottish trawlers—there is no doubt that it will severely limit their catching opportunities—but we think that it is justified because of conservation. However, we also had to consider the practical issues. A limit of 15 tonnes a month is less than 5 tonnes a week, but it would mean that a vessel taking a large haul would not have large discards. We are taking into account management and the potential impact of discards, which we are trying to minimise. We think that that is a fair point and that fishermen who understand bass, how they shoal and how a large haul can be caught, accept it. The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind the fact that the limit will take a lot of pressure off the stocks, and that has been welcomed.

We also hope to see progress on industrial fishing, which is a matter of great concern. I am very hopeful that, with the agreement of Denmark, we will be able to announce the first closed area for industrial fishing in the North sea. It will extend from north Northumberland to beyond Fraserburgh. The closure will eliminate the competition between fishermen and sea birds. We are using the science provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, based on the impact of sea birds. Issues such as migrating salmon and white fish stocks also play a part.

[Mr. Morley]

I want to pay tribute to the Danish Minister. This is a sensitive issue, but he has approached it in a spirit of co-operation and considered the scientific and conservation aspects. We are optimistic that we will get Denmark's support for the measure at this week's Council. It will be the first time that we have introduced measures to restrict industrial fishing. It is also an example of integration of environmental and fisheries management which we were called upon to carry out by the Cologne European Council. We take that issue seriously and are trying to apply some of the points.

Fisheries management and enforcement measures have also been introduced this year. When I became Minister two years ago, black fish was a serious problem. It depressed prices at fishing ports and had a devastating effect on stocks. We had to take firm action, and I make no apology for doing so because it is in the long-term interests of fishermen and the fishing industry. In January, our new designated ports system was introduced—there are now prior notification arrangements for all white fish landings made by vessels of more than 20 m.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Against the background of satellite tracking, is there still the same need for designated ports?

Mr. Morley: I shall talk about tracking in a moment. I accept that the installation of satellites gives us an opportunity to review vessels' control measures and bureaucracy and may give us an opportunity to relax those measures. As for designated ports, even if we know where vessels are, someone still needs to be able to carry out an inspection, or at least have the right to do so. I assure the hon. Lady that we understand that satellites can provide flexibility in reducing burdens and we want to consider carefully how to do that.

We have also tackled engine power and put in place measures to require the accurate declaration of engine power, which we believe to be essential to a level playing field in the United Kingdom and if measures to limit fishing are to be effective. However, as we recognise that there are practical issues relating to engine power, we have made generous transitional arrangements for fishermen who need to take action to correct deficits in their registered and licensed engine power. I believe that we can make progress on that.

As the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) said, satellites will come in from January for vessels more than 24 m long. More than 100 vessels are linked to our monitoring system and a further 250 are in the process of linking up. The system will apply to all EU vessels of that size that fish in our waters. Norway is also voluntarily applying the system to its vessels, and I welcome that action. There is an issue of enforcement, but there are benefits for fishermen's equipment, and safety implications arise from the knowledge of where vessels are around our coast.

From January, fixed quota allocations were introduced following the suggestion of the industry. The idea is to provide greater certainty within the industry, and fishermen should no longer be under pressure to maximise their catches simply to maintain a track record for the maximisation of quota. That will bring benefits. Producer organisations are more willing to make quota available to overcome problems in other parts of the fleet. The UK is likely to remain within its quota allocation for almost all stocks.

We shall review the operations of FQAs with the industry early in the new year, taking into account helpful recommendations from the Agriculture Committee on rules on the transfer of licences and quota, issues of ownership, and provision for new entrants, as well as the question of individual transferable quotas, which the Committee has asked us to consider.

Since 1 January, we have made it a licence condition that every UK-registered fishing vessel must demonstrate an economic link with this country. Contrary to the expectations of many, those arrangements are having a significant impact. Landings and related expenditure into the UK have increased. In some cases, additional quota has been made available, such as 50 tonnes of sole in the North sea, and we have allocated it to the inshore fishing fleet. Overall, the number of so-called quota hoppers has declined since the economic link measure was introduced.

That is a far more effective system than the factor 10 system was. The previous Government enacted the Merchant Shipping Act 1988, which was designed to address the quota-hopping problem. However, it addressed the problem in the wrong way, partly because it was driven by Europhobia and attitudes against other nationalities, rather than addressing the real management issues surrounding the problem. As a result of legal action, the UK is liable for damages for vessels illegally prevented from fishing after the 1988 Act's introduction. Many figures have been bandied about, but the court case has established only the right of vessels affected to claim compensation for the period during which they were prevented from fishing. It is up to the vessels to demonstrate the amount of the loss. It would be wrong, therefore, to say that an automatic sum of money should be made available for compensation.

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): As my hon. Friend knows, I used to represent several quota hoppers before the boundary commission intervened. On the measures introduced this year, what action will the Government take against quota hoppers that have not satisfied the criteria? Is my hon. Friend aware that several people in my former constituency believe that they can provide evidence showing that the fishing efforts being claimed by some quota hoppers were somewhat dubious?

Mr. Morley: I understand that point, and the matter must be examined carefully. It is up to the claimants to prove their claims.

On vessels that have not complied with the economic link conditions, regulations make it crystal clear that compliance is a licence condition. Any vessel that does not comply will have its licence confiscated. We have reviewed licensing, and I look forward to receiving a comprehensive report from an industry body, which will consider matters including capacity, penalty, aggregation and the sectors of the fleet that are within their multi-annual guidance programmes.

We shall also deal with the under-10 m fleet, an issue with which I have always had much sympathy. We have published a comprehensive consultation paper on the

management of the inshore fleet to try to find a strategy for the way forward. Some hon. Members will be aware that there have been some problems in the inshore fleet with this year's nephrops fishery—its expansion and the need to introduce management controls. Although we want to avoid lengthy and harmful closures in the under-10 m fleet, I cannot guarantee that that will always be possible—especially if effort continues to rise.

I am glad to see the investment that has taken place in the inshore fleet, but the problem is that many of the new boats are immensely more powerful than the boats that they have replaced; they are faster and more effective. That causes problems because we need to manage effort so as to stop it increasing. We need to consider those matters.

Many of the matters that I have mentioned involve new regulations and procedures, because much had to be done during the past two years. Many new measures had to be introduced—some of them were UK measures, to deal with particular problems, and some were European. I realise that they imposed burdens on the industry—I am sensitive to that. For that reason, we have asked officials to convene an early meeting with the industry to consider all aspects of regulation and bureaucracy, as well as issues such as the new satellites. We shall consider whether we can use that new technology to reduce some of the burdens on the industry. We take the matter seriously and we want to deal with it.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): There is one more issue that the Minister might add to his list, although it crosses Departments. It should interest him that the smallest fishermen are having great difficulty with the old share fishermen's stamp system. They find that jobseeker's allowance is not available to them when dreadful weather prevents them from fishing. Those are the very people who have been pushed to the margins by the larger and faster vessels to which the Minister referred.

Mr. Morley: The right hon. Gentleman will understand why I do not list the share fishermen's scheme, although I am not ducking the issue. It is important. I shall look into the matter after the debate and write to him.

One of the saddest parts of this annual debate is that it is traditional to reflect the dangers faced by fishermen at sea. Sadly, so far this year seven fishermen have lost their lives—two were lost when the Donna M sank, one each from the Coleen and Gradely, and three fishermen have been lost overboard. I am sure that the House will join me in expressing sympathy to the relatives and friends of all those who were lost. In 1998, 26 fishermen were lost. I hope that the significant reduction in the number of fatalities this year will be continued in future.

Safety grants are of interest to hon. Members—many of them have spoken on that subject. Safety at sea is most important. Obviously, it is a key responsibility of fishermen themselves. I am always concerned when I read of incidents where it appears that there has been a lack of precautions. We are all aware that many incidents are caused by the crew's lack of experience—sometimes, there is a failure to observe safety needs. This year, in two cases of fatal loss, the boats involved did not carry a life raft, which would have increased the crew's chances of survival.

Other factors closely related to accidents are the way in which the vessel is operated and changes in fishing methods and in the areas fished. The industry is well aware of those matters. We want to deal with training and the full use of appropriate safety equipment with the industry.

There has been pressure to reinstate the safety grant scheme. Hon. Members will be aware that, when my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister visited the south-west, he said that the safety grant scheme would be reinstated. We have been considering how that can be done. New structural funds will be introduced next year. There will be an opportunity to consider safety grants, bearing in mind that, under the old scheme, boats under 12 m were excluded and only certain items of equipment were covered. There are arguments over whether that was the most appropriate scheme. We also need to deal with the safety culture of the industry.

Safety is being taken seriously and we are looking into how we might reinstate a grant scheme. I emphasise that it will not be the old scheme, which was imperfect in many ways. We must consider a new safety scheme—that is what we are doing at present.

Other issues that are—

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Before my hon. Friend leaves the safety issue, I wonder whether he will take the opportunity to commend the work that has been done by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution during the 175 years of its existence. In my constituency, many fishermen serve on the local boats and instil the safety culture to which my hon. Friend referred. I am sure that all hon. Members would join me in commending the excellent work that the RNLI has done over 175 years.

Mr. Morley: I am very pleased to join my hon. Friend in supporting the work that the RNLI has done. It is true that many of its crews are from the local fishing community, and that they serve us very well.

Discussions have taken place on structural regulations. I shall not go into those in depth because they have been reported and I want to bring my remarks to a conclusion, but I shall emphasise one aspect. There is sometimes a misunderstanding, especially in some newspapers, to the effect that the evil bureaucrats in Brussels are denying fishermen fish, and that we go to Brussels to argue with them to get that fish back. It is not like that at all. The discussions are about the science, taking into account the sustainability of stock and the socio-economic effects on the industry. We shall have further discussions on the subject, but I emphasise that it is not an issue of horse trading, although I know that horse trading between Fisheries Ministers has gone on in the past.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Seahorse trading.

Mr. Morley: It is not exactly seahorse trading, but it has not been applied in a rational or scientific manner. The decisions that we take must be based on sound science and take into account fishermen's views. This is about management. It is also about technical conservation, as is shown by the idea of introducing no-take zones and closed areas for spawning stocks.

[Mr. Morley]

There is much in the Liberal Democrat amendment that is thoughtful and constructive. The Liberal Democrats are seriously addressing many of the issues, most of which we are considering. Much that is in the amendment features in the programme that we are trying to develop, and we would welcome their comments and involvement in shaping it.

I cannot say the same about the Conservative amendment; indeed, I am not even sure what it means. It is in Euro-sceptic jargon. I assume that it involves the more extreme and unachievable position of pulling out of the CFP.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): No, it does not.

Mr. Morley: Well, okay, but that is what has been said in the past, and that of course is a fantasy fisheries policy.

Mr. Paice: Read it.

Mr. Morley: I am being asked to read the amendment. I merely want to acknowledge that its wording differs subtly from what has been said in the past. For a long time, the Labour party has been advocating a policy of regional and local control. If the Conservative party has now shifted from its position that the United Kingdom should withdraw unilaterally from the CFP, it would be helpful to know that because that would be a major and very welcome shift away from a fantasy fisheries policy.

Unilateral withdrawal from the CFP is not achievable. One cannot ignore the rights of other countries that have fished our waters for generations, and in whose waters we have fished for generations. It is impossible to ignore the need for a European fisheries policy. It is also impossible to ignore the fact that the logic of taking an extreme position—such as advocating unilateral withdrawal from the CFP—is a complete withdrawal from the European Union. If that is the Conservative party's position, it is entitled to take it, but it should make that clear.

In conclusion, this will be a difficult year for negotiations on quotas. With my colleagues from the devolved Administrations, I shall go to Brussels to argue for the best deal that we can get for our fishing industry. We shall continue to address some of the industry's structural problems, for example, by considering the CFP report. We shall continue to develop the links that we have forged with the fishing industry and to involve the industry in developing sensible ideas, especially building on the ideas from the Agriculture Committee programmes on aspects of an achievable and sustainable fisheries policy. I believe that we all have a common interest in that. As parliamentarians, we have a common interest—with the industry, environmental groups and others—in ensuring that our fish stocks are managed.

I understand the implications of the proposed cuts in quotas, and I can assure the House that we shall certainly take into account the socio-economic impact on the industry when we decide how to negotiate the final quotas, bearing in mind the fact that the bottom line must be to achieve a sustainable fisheries management regime.

5.35 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I beg to move, To leave out from "future" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"and believes that this can only be achieved by negotiating a reform of the Common Fisheries Policy that will devolve power to national, regional and local levels."

I join the Minister in offering the condolences of Conservative Members to the families of those who lost their lives in the fishing industry in the past year.

I am amazed that the Minister should attack our amendment.

Mr. Morley: Very mildly.

Mr. Moss: The Minister says, "Very mildly" but he still attacked it, and he thought that the Liberal Democrat amendment was marvellous. However, the Opposition are embracing a policy that the Minister espoused only three years ago. He said:

"We believe that the CFP should be radically reformed to allow us far greater autonomy and national control of fishing waters within our country's limits."

Mr. Morley: Within the CFP.

Mr. Moss: The Minister did not say that. He added:

"We must say that the current situation is unacceptable and that there is a better way which meets the criteria of the CFP, but which gives all member states greater national control and a better way of managing fish stocks leading to a sustainable fishing industry. If we do not meet that objective, we will have no fishing industry."—[*Official Report, European Standing Committee A*, 23 July 1996; c. 25-27.]

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Welcome aboard.

Mr. Moss: My hon. Friend makes a very pertinent point.

The proposals for total allowable catches for the next fishing year make disturbing reading. If implemented as in the first draft, the effect—to use the words of a leading figure in the industry—would be catastrophic. The spectre of crisis has, indeed, been raised before, but never before has a cut of this magnitude been proposed across so many different species' stocks and, in particular, across all commercial white fish fisheries in all sea areas. The reason for that is not so much a sudden downturn in the health of those fish stocks, but the way in which scientific advice has been presented this year. Safe biological limits have been supplemented by precautionary limits within a precautionary approach.

No one in favour of conservation and the future sustainability of fish stocks would argue against that in principle, but there is a substantial gulf between theory and practice. Insufficient thought seems to have been given to how precautionary limits might be introduced without a major disruptive impact on the fishing industry.

The proposals for total allowable catches this year suggest a revenue loss for the United Kingdom fishing fleet of about £85 million to £90 million, and that is out of a total revenue of £660 million. Frankly, that loss is a disaster in the making, and is unsustainable in the industry. Is the Minister aware of the implications? What estimates has the Ministry made of their impact—

both social and economic—on fishing communities? The Minister alluded to the fact that he would consider that, but he gave the House no figures this evening. Do the figures for the loss come as a surprise to him, or is he well prepared with counter-arguments and proposals?

I am grateful to the Minister for his response to my question on the Hague preference; it will be gratefully received by the industry, which has been pressing for it. Members of the industry will have been in communication with him about that and other issues.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the major reduction in the proposed income of the United Kingdom fishing industry, but is he aware that the position in Northern Ireland will be worse? There is a proposal to reduce the income of the industry there by 30 per cent.—a dramatic cut in the income of fishermen—for next year.

Mr. Moss: I am sure that the Minister has taken note of those serious figures.

Is there no comfort that the Minister can give the fishing industry today about the stance that he will take at the Fisheries Council? Surely, a more phased approach could be proposed—more on the lines of a multi-annual approach—so that over, say, a three to five-year period the industry could move to the precautionary limits without the devastating socio-economic problems that the present proposals imply.

Nothing underlines more starkly the fact that the CFP is not working than the recently announced TACs for next year. Unlike three years ago, however, the Minister has not said a word today about real reform of the CFP, although I remember reading that it was, indeed, one of Labour's manifesto commitments.

The Minister argued today that the arrangements that have been agreed—in an exchange of letters with Jacques Santer—since the Amsterdam summit to establish a so-called economic link between the quota hoppers and the UK economy are having results. However, he did not in any way quantify those results. As we know, some observers have challenged the legality of those arrangements, and we have already seen how foreign trawler owners circumvent the regulations by landing catches in, for example, Scotland straight on to refrigerated trucks to be driven over land back to the home port. The Minister did not say whether that practice has now been stopped.

On quota hoppers, the key issue is not the number of UK nationals or boats employed but the size of the boats and their catch potential. During the time of the Amsterdam treaty, quota hoppers had only 2 per cent. of the total fleet, but they took 44 per cent. of the plaice catch and 46 per cent. of the hake catch. Estimates today point to a share of 25 per cent. of total national tonnage.

Mr. Salmond: The hon. Gentleman will remember that during the passage of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988, the Conservative Government were well warned about the likely consequences of the direction of their legislation. Given that, and the fact that local councillors have been warned that they can be surcharged if they make poor decisions, does the hon. Gentleman see any case for a surcharge on Conservative Prime Ministers and fishing Ministers to make up for the tens of millions of pounds that is about to be paid to quota hoppers which could have been invested in our fishing industry?

Mr. Moss: As the hon. Gentleman knows, proper legal advice was sought at the time and taken.

Mr. Gummer: While my hon. Friend is considering surcharging, may I ask whether he would like to surcharge the Scottish National party for being against every single conservation measure that would bear on every voter whose support it hoped to get?

Mr. Moss: A good political point was made for all to hear.

Mr. Ainger *rose—*

Mr. Moss: I shall press on now and take no more interventions. The Minister spoke for 55 minutes, and I should prefer to leave some time for other hon. Members to contribute to the debate.

The Labour Government's priorities for the fishing industry are more effective and consistent enforcement; more effective conservation of fish stocks; the achievement of a sustainable future for the fishing industry through structural and conservation measures; increased participation by fishermen in the development of policy; and an improvement in the regional dimension of the CFP. A staggering feature of that list is the omission of any mention of CFP reform.

In measuring the Government's performance against their priorities, I shall concentrate first on enforcement and satellite monitoring. The Government have declined to part-fund satellite monitoring for vessels over 24 m long, blocking any chance of access to EU grants. As we know, boats from other EU countries receive a 100 per cent. grant for that measure.

On conservation, the Government have failed to get agreement on technical proposals such as the mesh size for white fish. As the Minister agreed, they have also failed to prevent the introduction of lower minimum landing sizes for three species, which will be implemented next month.

The third priority was to achieve a sustainable future through structural changes. The key issue here is modernisation. The UK fleet is aged and becoming older by the year. For vessels between 12 and 24 m long, the average age is 25 years. As we know, European funding has been available to assist with the construction and modernisation of fishing vessels, and all our European partners, especially Spain and France, have taken full advantage of that facility to rebuild their fleets by replacing obsolete vessels with modern capacity.

All that has been denied the UK industry since 1989, initially because of the UK's failure to meet the European Community's fleet reduction targets and, more recently, because of the Treasury's unwillingness to permit participation. The Government's position is that, having paid substantial sums to take capacity out of the UK fleet through decommissioning schemes, it makes little sense to pay the industry to build new vessels. That would have an undeniable logic, were it not for the fact that the recently agreed EC structures regulation ensures that EC funding will continue to be made available to other member state fleets.

[Mr. Moss]

The prospect of the UK fleet continuing to become increasingly decrepit while our continental competitors modernise is, therefore, very real. Continental fleets largely fish the same grounds and sell to the same markets; clearly, they will have an economic advantage using modern vessels, as the cost per tonne of producing fish will be lower using new capacity. We should bear in mind also the fact that, with revenue generated in such a way, the door remains open for any other member state to buy UK licences and quotas. A new wave of quota-hopping, surfing on EU structural aid, is a clear possibility.

The Government's position ignores the critical factor, which is equity. For other member states to modernise while the UK fleet is denied the same access to funding can only be a recipe for winding down the UK fleet.

Also on the issue of a sustainable future for the industry, there are the unrelenting and upward costs of regulations, which are often imposed unilaterally by the UK Government. Examples include light dues, hygiene inspection, tonnage measurements, survey fees, escalating fuel prices, installation of the global marine distress system and the requirement of the new control regulation—and the list goes on. What of safety grants? I thought that the Minister was going to make a commitment to them, but he simply said that the Government would look at them afresh, as and when new structural funds appear.

The final plank of the Government's priorities relates to a regional dimension for the CFP, but nobody seems to know what that really means. Even the Minister is not clear. In his evidence to the Agriculture Committee in June, he said in answer to a question on the subject:

"there are some key issues to resolve, and one of the key issues is the definition of both regional and zonal management, because it means different things to different people, different countries and different parts of the industry. So, before we even start to make much progress on this, we need to resolve that particular issue."

However, he said reassuringly:

"we are giving thought to that at the present time."

Given the continuing decline of the UK industry, does not the Minister recognise the need for a great deal more urgency on that issue?

On the face of it, the policy of regional and zonal management is an attempt to restore some competency to member states—probably not individually, and more probably as groups of states—although it is still within the EU structure of the CFP. The policy is flawed on two counts. First, there is the legal position, especially of new entrants to the EU. Where will equal access to a common resource be if everything is stitched up before they join? Secondly, is such management really in British fishermen's interests?

As with any other significant change to the CFP, unanimity would be required, and that is most unlikely. Which member states would be involved in regional or zonal management? Would the Spanish, for example, be involved in the management scheme for the Irish box? On the regional management scheme, how are matters to be resolved—by some form of qualified majority voting or by unanimity? There are so many questions, but it is blindingly obvious to the UK fishing industry that the cards look stacked against it.

The cry goes up continuously from the fishing industry for a level playing field. It believes that it is seriously disadvantaged, and there is, indeed, plenty of evidence of that. How do we begin to address the inequalities of the EU system? Why is not that a Government priority?

It has long been a criticism that employment of UK subjects in the directorates-general in Brussels is well below a fair representation in relation to population. In DG XIV—the fisheries DG—only four grade A officials are UK subjects. That is a miserly 1.4 per cent. of the total. Let us compare that with 17 per cent. in DG I and 16.1 per cent. in DG VII. Does the Minister consider that there is fair and adequate representation at the heart of decision making on the CFP?

Another grievance is the lop-sided grant structure. There is no mention of the Government's intention to renegotiate a more favourable outcome for the UK in the successor to FIFG—the financial instrument of fisheries grant. In the mid-1990s, the UK was the fifth largest recipient of such aid—173 million ecu, compared to France, with 267 million ecu and Italy, with 408 million ecu. Way out in front was Spain, which received 1,163 million ecu, a staggering sum.

It has been calculated that the UK's share of supporting the upgrade of the Spanish fleet during the same period was £100 million, on top of the UK's share of the £90 million cost for the purchase of CFP rights to fish in third-party waters.

We heard not a word about such inequities from the Minister today. Does he think that it is fair? Does he believe that UK taxpayers and UK fishermen are getting value for money? Does he agree that arrangements such as the second-generation agreements, which benefit Spain particularly, constitute a fair and proper national fleet reduction, which may extend further favours to the Spanish in the future, possibly when negotiations start in earnest after 2003?

That brings me to the key date of December 2002. The Minister continues to peddle his complacent and over-confident line, first in the Select Committee debate a few weeks ago and again today. No one disputes the fact that, by midnight on 31 December 2002, under Council regulation 3760/92, member states, under qualified majority voting, must decide on any changes to the existing arrangements. If none occur, the arrangements are rolled over, with one exception—foreign vessel access to national six and 12-mile limits. A further derogation will be required to maintain those restrictions beyond December 2002. The previous one was for 20 years, and the assumption is that the proposal will be for a similar period from January 2003.

That all sounds very well, but even though a majority vote may be obtained under QMV, some states, which stand to lose out, may challenge the outcome in the European Court. The Council is, therefore, likely to seek unanimity to avoid such challenges, but that is far from guaranteed.

One of the countries likely to lose out is Spain, which posted its intentions back in 1994, when it withheld its consent to admit new members to the EU until it was given access to more fishing—in that case, 40 boats into the Irish box, which was previously restricted.

Mr. Morley: May I deal with that point? I do not intend to wind up, in order to give maximum time to Back

Benchers. On the point about QMV, that is true, but no country has expressed an interest in not renewing coastal limits. That is why I am confident. It is in the interest of our industry and that of other states. With regard to the Opposition motion, there has been a significant shift of emphasis in the Opposition's attitude to the CFP. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that it is not their policy to withdraw unilaterally from the CFP?

Mr. Moss: We have never said that we would withdraw unilaterally from the CFP. We said that, in negotiations, we would insist on repatriation of national control. The hon. Gentleman agreed with that when he was an Opposition spokesman.

Portugal is another coastal state which, like Spain, would lose out because it has no proper coastal shelf. It is difficult to see how the blocking votes of those countries could be overcome without a change in the voting system. Such changes imply a direct assault on the acquis communautaire.

It is comforting to hear the Minister's reassurance that all will be well on the night. He has just reiterated that at present there is no sign of any state not wishing to extend the derogation, but, judging from the shenanigans over the beef issue, until countries cast their vote, it is difficult to anticipate their attitude.

Why cannot the Minister acknowledge the pitfalls that can be seen by every commentator to whom one turns for advice on the issue? Does the Minister have a deadline by which he would require agreement? If so, will he tell us what it is? Are the UK's six and 12-mile limits non-negotiable, or will he yield them up in the interests of some compromise agreement?

The CFP claims to be science-led, but regularly fails to match that claim because the data that it uses are far from solid or reliable. No one envies the administrators who have to come up with the TACs each year at about this time. To balance the many variables—including stock counts, increasing catching efficiency, estimates of illegal landings and discards, how recruitment operates, and the inter-connectivity of the food chain—must require the patience of Job and the genius of Einstein.

Given the lack of real communication between fishermen, administrators and scientists, it is no wonder that the annual announcement is considered by many to be a rather futile exercise. It also has the ability to generate anger and frustration, not just because of the disputes over fish stocks, but because fishermen are tied up in UK ports and see other EU boats fishing on the horizon and taking the so-called "limited" stocks from under their very noses.

Some years ago, illegally landed fish, or black fish, were reliably estimated to amount to up to 40 per cent. of reputed catches. The other wild card that derails a science-led CFP is discarding, which occurs most where quotas are tight, as in the North sea, and least where under-sized fish can find a ready market or where there is a lax policing system at the ports, as in some southern countries. At the Select Committee, the Minister boasted that he had solved the black fish problem, but the industry acknowledges that it is still significant.

Discarding is scandalous. No doubt many hon. Members will refer to it this evening. It has already come up in questions to the Minister. Some scientific estimates put discards at more than 30 per cent. of the fish stock. It is not good enough for the Government to argue that discards are an inevitable consequence of a quota system, particularly as the justification for the TACs and quotas is largely the conservation of stocks and a sustainable resource.

Why is not the Minister pressing for changes that would at least start to tackle the problem? As we know, Norway bans discards. Admittedly, it monitors catches at sea, has fewer ports and has fewer species in its fisheries, but why could not the CAP introduce rules for spot monitoring? Seasonal closures could reduce discards, but the most practical way is through technical measures such as improved fishing gear and mesh sizes.

I know that the Minister has been active in that regard, and he announced earlier that the UK would regulate a larger mesh size in the near future, but that unilateral decision may again limit the ability of UK fishermen to compete.

The problem of introducing technical measures is one of harmonisation between member states, which is almost impossible, given the wide variation in fisheries and environments. That does not mean that the Government should not have a policy on technical changes, and a programme and timetable for their introduction.

It is difficult to find anyone who believes that the common fisheries policy is working. The general downward trend of the total allowable catches is testimony to that. The CFP is full of contradictions. It seeks to conserve under-age fish that have not yet reached breeding age, but brings in changes to lower minimum landing sizes. We believe—as the Minister and his party believed only a few years ago—that there must be fundamental reform of the CFP.

Conservative policy is therefore to insist on such reform to devolve power to national, regional and local levels. We will press for national or local controls to be established over our own waters, through zonal management or coastal management or in some other way. We are more than happy to discuss a way forward with the industry. These are not exclusive rights of access, and we would hope to develop sensible bilateral agreements and give recognition to the historic rights of other countries.

The Minister has a tough task ahead of him in the Council. We urge him to be robust and to fight for the interests of UK fishermen.

5.59 pm

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important annual debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his constructive approach, which contrasts with the spirit in which these debates used to be held. We do not hear any of the aggression and bad feeling that existed previously. That is reflected in my experience of the way in which the industry is co-operating. Now even the fish catchers speak to the merchants in my part of the world. There is a much more constructive and co-operative approach.

I do not know whom the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) consulted in the industry when he prepared his amendment to the Government motion. When representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, whom I met earlier today, saw the word "national" in the amendment, they were extremely

[Mr. Frank Doran]

concerned. The federation is working across national boundaries with other European countries, their producer organisations and Governments. It does not like the thought that we shall return to the petty nationalism that identified the approach taken by the Conservative Government. That certainly worries it as it wants to see a constructive approach.

The importance of the debate is coloured by the debates that are still to take place with the other EU members. At the top of the agenda for the fishermen and fish processors in my constituency is the proposed new total allowable catches, and particularly the reduction in some of the quotas. Some of these are causing considerable concern, such as a 26 per cent. reduction in the haddock quota—although that is much better than we had feared.

My hon. Friend the Minister referred to saithe and monkfish quotas. I am aware from my discussions with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation that there is especial concern about the monkfish quota for the west coast fisheries and the way in which that quota reduction has been reached. I am advised that there is virtually no scientific evidence relating to monkfish and that it is particularly difficult to calculate the age of the fish. The experience of west coast fishermen is that there are large numbers of monkfish and ample fish to meet the existing quota.

A research project is under way that was jointly sponsored by the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the marine laboratory in Aberdeen. It is only six months into its work, with another 18 months to go. As I represent a constituency on the east coast, I am concerned that there will be a displacement of fishing activity from the west coast round to the east, where there is also a reduction in quota but where the baseline is that much higher. The removal of virtually 1,000 tonnes from a 3,000 tonnes quota will have a major impact, and I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to examine that problem in his discussions in Europe.

A major problem in the management of the industry has improved over the past few years. There have, for example, been references to multi-annual quotas. The way in which the fishing industry—processors and catchers—has accepted rather than simply moved towards the concept of a sustainable fishing industry is interesting. It is important that that is recognised. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister recognises the constructive approach that the industry is taking.

There is concern about huge reductions or fluctuations in quota. Sometimes we see an increase in certain quotas, although not so many this year, but it is possible that there will be quite a large increase in the haddock quota next year because there is such a strong year class this year. I have received several representations recently about a multi-annual approach. I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Minister about the need for stability in stocks, but I would argue against that being seen as an excuse for not preparing multi-annual quotas.

There needs to be some predictability in the industry. We are discussing in December quotas that will take effect in about three weeks' time. It is difficult for fish catchers, processors and the entire industry to plan ahead if the market is thrown into turmoil. It is important that we move towards a system that leads to much more predictability within the industry.

We know that huge sums are invested in the industry, both onshore and offshore. In my constituency, there is a sea change in the way in which the processing sector has developed. Traditionally, it has consisted of small, one-man businesses. They are usually one-man businesses because there are not many women at that end of the industry. However, we are going through a period of consolidation. Sectors and companies are being forced to merge because they cannot meet the competition. As for the retail side of the industry, almost two thirds of produce goes through supermarkets. The traditional method of retailing has changed. We need much more certainty and predictability in the industry. It is important that that is examined.

There are questions about the way in which decisions are taken. I think we all accept that scientific evidence is crucial. However, I think it will be accepted on both sides of the House that that evidence is not necessarily complete; certainly it is not perfect. I am concerned that scientific evidence leads to a proposal for significant reductions in quota when that goes against the experience of fishermen who report in certain areas. Saithe is a good example on the west coast. The fishermen there claim that there are abundant supplies of saithe, but the scientific evidence suggests that there should be significant reductions in TACs. It is an issue which has been discussed by the all-party fisheries group.

We are concerned that what starts as scientific advice is almost treated as the rule of law by the time that it gets to Brussels. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will do all that he can to argue our case nationally. It worries me that officials in Brussels—I hope that this does not apply to United Kingdom officials—tend to hide behind scientific advice, with the result that practical evidence, such as that of fishermen, is not taken into account.

Both sides of the industry—catchers and processors—recognise the need to have an environmentally sustainable policy. The Scottish Fishermen's Federation recently proposed to my hon. Friend new technical measures that would result in the introduction of square mesh panels and thinner twine, which makes up the nets. If implemented, these proposals would allow more smaller fish to escape. These are constructive proposals from the industry, which I hope will be introduced, I hope also that they will help to reduce discards, which is a concern for us all.

Mr. Morley: The suggestions from the industry and the Committees were helpful. The action that the fishermen are taking has helped in our discussions to get an increase in the haddock quota. I shall be pressing these matters on the Commission in relation to the calculations that it undertakes.

Mr. Doran: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. This is another example of the industry and Government working in co-operation. We are moving towards a real partnership.

In my constituency, the Aberdeen Fish Curers and Fish Merchants Association has developed an environmental policy, which is a radical step for the industry. A collection of small businesses sees its interests in developing and being part of a process of procuring a sustainable industry in the North sea. The future of these businesses depends on the sustainability of stocks in the North sea. They do not like a rollercoaster. Like me,

they believe that the only way forward is to develop stability in our stocks through a sustainable fishing policy, which takes into account the social and economic aspects of the industry together with the biological aspects. Scientific evidence is important, but it is only part of other elements in reaching a solution.

We need to recognise the importance of the individual fisherman and processor. Year in and year out, we ask the fishing industry and individuals within it to make sacrifices. We cannot ask fishermen to catch fewer fish if they are not to be part of the future of their own industry. That must be a key part of future policy.

It is also important to recognise that environmental groups are focusing more and more on the industry. I know that all of us who are interested in the industry have been lobbied recently by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which is beginning to take an interest in it. That is important in terms of the pressure that it will apply to the industry.

I shall speak briefly about the contribution that can be made by public authorities, especially local authorities. In my city of Aberdeen, Aberdeen city council and Aberdeenshire council, the neighbouring local authority, established a fisheries summit two years ago. They brought together every group in the city that had an interest in the fishing industry, and hammered out the matters on which local authorities could help the industry to make progress. That has resulted in many improvements in the way in which issues are tackled locally. Grampian Enterprise is involved and has a better view of the effect of employment in the fishing industry on our area. However, the most significant step forward is the involvement of Aberdeen city council in responding to the major problem that the industry faces throughout Britain: the likelihood of increased water charges through the waste water directive.

Aberdeen city council has decided to construct a waste water treatment plant which the council, Grampian Enterprise and the industry will fund. It will protect my local fish processors from the huge increase in waste water charges. That is a significant local solution to a national problem. I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister considers policy on the industry, he will take into account the important contribution that local government can make.

I conclude by making a point that has not been mentioned because it is not strictly relevant to today's debate. We have heard much recently about the beef war between Britain and France, and the Conservative party's call for a trade war. My local fishing industry depends greatly on our exports, especially to France but also to Spain. My office is opposite the Aberdeen fish market. Every day, I can see from my office the lorries leaving for France. My fishing industry would be devastated by a war with France over beef. I hope that the Government will never countenance it.

6.12 pm

Sir Edward Heath (Old Bexley and Sidcup): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief speech. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary will realise that all too little time has been allocated for debate on such an important subject.

I was born by the sea, and I lived by the sea for more than 50 years. I swam and fished in the sea when I was a kid; later, I won the national record for the amount of cod caught in a single day—146 lbs 13 oz. Therefore, I have some experience of the matters that we are discussing. I have travelled all over the world, and sailed and raced in the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Pacific. Wherever I have travelled, I have talked to fishermen, who have been immensely helpful to us at times. I understand their views and share their anxieties.

I want to look back to some original foundations. We can consider modern problems, but it is also important to look back to 1963 and 1964. Some people claim that the European Community created its fisheries policy in 1963 at the last moment to try to prevent us from becoming a member and to make matters as difficult as it could for us. That is a complete falsehood. The Community's fisheries policy was first discussed by the French in 1963, and they continued to discuss it, to try to resolve problems and create a policy until 1969. A general review of Community policy, including fisheries policy, then took place and it was decided to try to settle the policy by spring 1970. The Community did not succeed in that, and the policy was finally settled in December 1970. We took part in the discussions that followed, and the Community knew our position perfectly well.

There is an answer to those who claim that we sold out to the Community or to the French: we got the decision for which we asked. We asked for the 12-mile arrangement—six miles plus six—and to stick to the arrangements that had existed since the relevant legislation came into force.

Mr. Nicholls: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Edward Heath: No. I am sorry, but I shall not give way because there is no time to do so.

We got the decision that we wanted at the time. It was to last for 10 years, and it was then renewed for 20 years. It will be discussed and possibly re-created in 2002. That policy, which suited us, has remained in operation.

I want to consider deep-sea fishing. At the time, there was a great difference between our deep-sea fishermen and other fishermen. That point is often overlooked nowadays. The coastal fishermen were in the minority. It is also forgotten that when the Conservative Government came to office in 1970, we were at war with Iceland over deep-sea fishing. We had to send warships to protect our fishermen. We got a settlement on political grounds, which hardly changed our landing of fish—I do not know whether the Icelanders ever realised that. However, for four years after that, we were still in the 900,000 series. We did not lose out over that, but we lost our deep-sea fishing industry.

I tried to resolve that by asking the Minister of Agriculture to organise a search for other parts of the world that we could recommend to our deep-sea fishermen. We quickly discovered that the coast of Africa was useless because it was largely monopolised by the Russians. We went to the coast off South America, where excellent opportunities were found. They were put to our fishing organisations. It was reported that, when landed, the deep-sea fish looked awful but tasted delicious. We passed around the information but it was never used, and very few fishermen fish off the coast of Latin America. The change in the balance happened then, and it affected the matters that we have discussed today and in the past.

The arrangements that exist today were not accepted in my time because they were not necessary, but Mrs. Thatcher accepted them when she was Prime

[Sir Edward Heath]

Minister and said that they were necessary. I agreed with her; they were the right measures. We must protect the industry by limiting catches—there can be no doubt about it. Unless one is prepared to face up to that, we shall get nowhere. That is why the Government are right—even if they have changed their minds—to pursue the policy thoroughly. I hoped that my party would agree with that. However, the Conservative amendment leads one to conclude that the party wants us to leave the Community. If we accepted the amendment, we would demand to be outside any Community fishing policy. The Community would not accept that, not for a moment.

Mr. Nicholls: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Edward Heath: No, I am sorry.

The Community would not accept that for a moment and we would be forced to give way or get out. I want my fellow Members to realise that. We have to be realistic: that is the situation, so there is no point in tabling such amendments because they are entirely unrealistic and completely ineffective.

We are in a situation in which it is absolutely right to have limits, and if hon. Members look at our figures they will see that we have done very well—much better than most. I am not complaining about that in the least—it has been achieved by the proper means—but, looking to the future, we have to appreciate the situation fully, reach agreements and accept and operate them. If the fishermen have that explained to them, they will understand it perfectly well. I have talked to them on many occasions, and whenever I send them a letter explaining something I never receive a counter-answer saying, "Oh, we can't accept that" or "You're wrong." It is obvious to me that when they analyse an issue they recognise the real facts and the action required to deal with them. That is why I hope that we shall give them encouragement from the House today.

6.21 pm

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): In moving the motion, the Minister made a broad sweep of the canvas. In the time that will fairly be allocated to me, however, it will not be possible to deal with many of those issues and I shall therefore concentrate on one or two matters specific to the Northern Ireland fishing industry. It would be an understatement to say that our fishermen are greatly disturbed and alarmed by the total allowable catches and quotas proposed for 2000 for most of the main marketable Irish sea species. Such proposals are totally unacceptable to them and will place an enormous economic burden on them and their families, on the onshore industries that depend on them and on the economies of the fishing villages in my constituency—Kilkeel and Ardglassas—as well that of Portavogie, in the constituency of Strangford.

The cuts are of a most dramatic dimension. The European Commission has proposed 69.1 per cent. reduction in the TAC of Irish sea cod and, if that is not bad enough, 40 per cent. reductions for Irish sea whiting, haddock and herring. How can our industry survive such cuts made in one fell swoop? It is not possible. On top of that, there is a proposed reduction from 23,000 tonnes to 17,200 tonnes for nephrops, which is our main crop. That will immediately wipe out in that sector alone £3 million of gross takings for those small communities.

It is argued that many of the reductions are based on scientific facts, but most of us could be forgiven for questioning some of the bases on which these scientists make their recommendations. I shall give the House a brief example. There were substantial stocks and catches of all those species for the first six months of 1999, but then the fish disappeared for no apparent reason. The scientists said that the temperature of the inner Irish sea had increased by 2 per cent. and the stocks would come back in the autumn when the temperature returned to its normal seasonal average, but it did not do so. The migratory habits of the fish had changed and their dispersal was such that the trawlers could not make economic sorties on the shoals. That, however, does not mean that the fish are not there; they have simply moved across the demarcation lines that have been so conveniently drawn on the map. I suspect that these drastic and unacceptable reductions in respect of all those main species are based on not the scientific fact of the absence of fish, but the evidence of a lack of catches, and that is an entirely different concept.

I must say to the Minister that there is no doubt whatever that the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, the industry and the onshore jobs that come from it will be decimated if the proposals are carried. I am sure that he is not content with the figures. I hope that they are not a fait accompli and that the Council at its meetings on December 16 and 17—wherever they are held, be it London, Brussels or anywhere else—will reject them for their lack of scientific basis and because the proposals will decimate the north Irish fishing industry.

In 1991 and 1992, the Commission recognised the uniqueness of the ecosystem that is particular to the Irish sea, which is virtually an enclosed seaway, and that the special circumstances and needs of the fishing industry had to be addressed. That has never been done, but I ask the Minister to look back to that debate to see where there is reason, justice and logic for allowing him to convince his counterparts in Europe that the cuts are not acceptable. He has rightly mentioned their socio-economic consequences and the motion itself says that

"the regional differences of fisheries and their communities are fully recognised."

I ask for that regional difference to be fully recognised and for the drastic and unacceptable cuts in TACs to be eliminated. The TACs should revert to what they were, at least for 1999, to provide a sustainable industry.

In an intervention, the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) briefly touched on the Hague preference and its invocation by the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Surely, under the new political dispensation—which I welcome and to which the Minister has referred—and, in particular, in the North-South Ministerial Council, special attention could be given to that particular problem to ameliorate the adverse effects of the Hague preference where it is called upon by the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, that should also be a matter for the proposed British-Irish Council, but such consideration cannot be given in this round of talks. Our Agriculture and Fisheries Minister will not have a place at the table with the Minister in the negotiations, I assume, so we depend totally on him and his Department delivering on this problem.

Mr. Gummer *rose—*

Mr. Curry *rose—*

Mr. Morley: I assure the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) that the Irish Minister, along with the

Scottish Minister, will be with me at every stage of the discussions and fully involved.

Mr. John D. Taylor *rose—*

Mr. McGrady: I thank the Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I make it clear to the House that the hon. Member for South Down was allowing the Minister to intervene?

Mr. McGrady: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. John D. Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way now?

Mr. McGrady: Yes.

Mr. Taylor: Was the hon. Gentleman referring to the presence of the new Northern Ireland Fisheries Minister or that of the Irish Minister? I think that the Minister's reply referred to the Irish Minister, but we want to know about the Northern Ireland Minister.

Mr. McGrady: I am not sure that I can clarify an answer that was not given by me. The Minister referred to Brid Rodgers, the Minister responsible for agriculture and fisheries in the new devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland. I am delighted to have the assurance that she and her officials will be with the Under-Secretary at the table, and will share responsibility for delivering a much better deal for the fishing industry in Northern Ireland.

In view of the time constraints, I shall not pursue any other issue except a matter that has not been mentioned but is particularly important to the fishermen of Northern Ireland. The Chancellor of the Exchequer introduced a new scheme for small businesses whereby, in Northern Ireland, as a sort of peace dividend, there would be 100 per cent. capital allowance grant on capital expenditure. Up until the past two or three days, it was anticipated that such a facility would be extended to capital expenditure in the fishing industry. Before leaving home this morning, I was informed that the fishing industry is excluded from the 100 per cent. relief that was given to small businesses in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Minister will be as surprised as I am by that decision, and will think it unjust, inequitable and unfair. I hope that he will take the matter up with his ministerial colleague for the purpose of clarification.

I cannot emphasise enough the fact that the 70 and 40 per cent. cuts across the main species will decimate the Northern Irish fishing industry. The Minister must not allow those figures to be on the paper at the end of his negotiations.

6.32 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'in taking note of the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum, submitted by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, on 5th December 1999, recalls that the previous Government added to the burden on UK fishing communities and failed to take any decisive action to protect British fishing interests in 18 years; believes that the Government should establish a coherent joined-up vision of where the UK wants the fishing industry to be in the medium and long term; recommends that the Government both itself and in its negotiations with European and other fishing nations seeks: to develop arrangements which significantly improve the cooperative relationship between fishermen and scientists, to avoid the last-minute annual total allowable catch and quota-setting process which does much to damage this relationship and the ability of the industry to plan ahead, to bring forward proposals to regularise and manage the trading of track records and fishing licences, to establish a decentralised system based on regional fisheries management whilst seeking to reduce the need for discards and engage fishermen in management decisions, to ensure equality of monitoring and enforcement across the European Union, to develop a pan-European policy to encourage low-impact fishing methods, and to reinstate a system of fishing safety grants.'.

There is little time left to discuss this substantial amendment to the Government's motion, the spirit of which the Liberal Democrats agree with, although we want to beef it up along these lines. I have some sympathy with the Minister because of the great difficulty that he is in, especially over the scientific advice. I am sure that he would not wish this on himself, and it puts him in a difficult position in the negotiations that he faces later this week in Brussels. However, as a member of an Opposition party, I shall exploit his discomfort whenever appropriate, but in a responsible way.

The Minister accepts, as I do, that some stocks are in a serious state of decline, and robust and responsible action must be taken. The industry wants a medium-term vision, as described by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran), with a multi-annual quota. That would make it much easier for the industry to swallow what I think will be an extremely bitter pill this year.

As for Conservative opposition, I was waiting in anticipation to see whether there would be a significant change in Conservative party policy with the change of its spokesperson. It is unclear, and the jury is still out on the Conservative party's position.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. George: No. I would enjoy an intervention from the hon. Gentleman, but, in view of the time constraints, I have to move on.

The Conservative amendment is curious, because, in the Scottish Parliament last week, the Conservatives tabled an amendment advocating the reform of the common fisheries policy that devolves powers to regional and zonal levels. There was no mention of national levels. That is a curious and perplexing amendment, and I cannot help but note that the Conservatives have criticised others for saying one thing in one place and another thing somewhere else, because that is what they are doing now with their amendments in the Scottish and Westminster Parliaments.

Mr. Moss: I have a news release from the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) who visited the Looe fishermen. It says that if the Liberal Democrats do not get their way, they

"would have to withdraw Britain from the Common Fisheries policy."

In a letter, Mr. Robin Teverson MEP says that the Liberal Democrats would advocate

"actual changes to the Treaty of Corfu"

and other treaties.

Mr. George: The hon. Gentleman is right, in that, in all Opposition parties, there are some who stray—he made that point earlier—and make irresponsible calls for pulling out of the CFP and repatriation. I speak on behalf of the

[Mr. George]

Liberal Democrat party in Parliament. I could appeal to irresponsible and populist opposition and call for a unilateral withdrawal from the common fisheries policy, but I am making it absolutely clear that that is not our view. The Liberal Democrats provide responsible opposition. We want radical reform of the common fisheries policy, but not withdrawal from it, as that is unrealistic and not on the agenda.

The background papers to today's debate refer to progress towards meeting targets under the multi-annual guidance programme—that matter has not been dealt with in the debate—and the TACs and quotas for next year. As other hon. Members have said, here we go again. What other industry would tolerate being managed in such a way that it has to limp on year after year, never being sure where it is going? That is a product of either poor circumstances or poor policy management.

Politicians who engage in the fishing industry and anyone who has responsibility for fishing policy will know that fishing is a no-go, no-win area: it is a poisoned chalice, as I have told the Minister before. Last week, the Minister was harangued and verbally roughed up in the south-west. Given the views expressed by fishermen in that area, he may have thought that not being given worse treatment was tantamount to a ringing endorsement. The fishing issue is not for politicians of a nervous disposition. This issue either results in Ministers being harangued and verbally roughed up, or is an opportunity for certain people to get on their high horse about European constitutional issues and to use fishermen as front-line troops in their own xenophobic war. The fishing industry requires responsible and serious leadership, not such an irresponsible approach.

If we wanted to contrive a set of circumstances in which to produce really bad policy, we could not do much better than start here. The relationship between politicians and fishermen has not been good for some time. That relationship needs to be worked on, as does that between fishermen and scientists, which, despite some improvements, is still not what it should be.

The fishing industry faces this 11th hour brinkmanship: this annual short-term, short-sighted approach to the management of fishing policy in which the crucial issue of the quota for the following year is decided only a few weeks before the end of the year. We need a coherent, joined-up strategy to take the industry forward. We need a coherent policy on quota management and trade, technical measures, equality of monitoring and enforcement across Europe and policies to improve the relationship between scientists and fishermen.

Many hon. Members have already made the point that the quota settlement proposed for next year would take quotas for all stocks to their lowest levels for a considerable time. The industry is also facing increased fuel costs, compliance costs and satellite monitoring costs, and the introduction of a global maritime distress system and tonnage proposals. The quota cuts could take £88.5 million from an industry with a total revenue of £660 million.

The scientific base is in the form of advice, not instruction. Some assessments of stock, such as west of Scotland monkfish, do not have an adequate scientific base. The industry has argued to that effect, and I think that it has sound evidence.

Fishermen feel that no proper account is taken of effort limitations, or of decommissioning controls, when quotas are set in the beam trawler sector. As others have pointed out, advice is sometimes out of kilter with experience—for example, in the case of the wholesale dumping of saithe in Scotland. This is no way in which to plan for such an important industry. The industry needs meaningful mid-term blueprints, and it needs discussions early in the year between fishermen and scientists.

I heard the wise words of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), and I am aware of his experience. I have to say that, for fishermen in Cornish and south-west waters, the original quota settlement on which relative stability is now based was not satisfactory. It was clearly not good enough in places like area VII, where the French have 75 per cent. of the cod quota, while local fishermen have only 15 per cent.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. George: I cannot possibly do so, given the amount of time that remains.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the Hague preference. The Minister said that he would consider invoking it in Scotland, and I hope that he will extend that to include hake stocks in western waters.

I think that the Minister accepted our arguments about low-impact fishing, which is mentioned in our amendment, but I do not think that his answer to me about bass was adequate. Fishermen in Cornish waters, and in the south-west, are concerned about the way in which the "15 tonnes per month" decision was made. It was not part of the original consultation. The Minister will appreciate that the fishermen are not happy, and I ask him to keep the matter under close review.

Safety is an important and tragic issue. Today, we learned of another tragedy in Grimsby, involving a Brixham trawler, and in October, we lost another of my constituents off the coast of the Isles of Scilly. Following the announcement of an end to fishing safety grants in May, I am encouraged by the fact that the Minister—having gone round the mulberry bush of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Deputy Prime Minister—is now reconsidering their reintroduction.

Concern has been expressed about the safety of beam trawlers following the investigation of the loss of the Margaretha Maria, a trawler from my constituency, in November 1997, with the loss of four lives. The findings of the marine accidents investigation branch make it clear that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's own stability tests may not be adequate. I am not saying that all beam trawlers are fundamentally unstable—I have been out on them, and they have a good track record—but the MCA has been criticised by the MAIB. It is important for the tests to be improved, and for our fishermen to know that they are adequate. That means carrying out the tests in dynamic, rather than static conditions.

I have spoken briefly on what is a substantial amendment. It is important to reinstate fishing safety grants, to encourage low-impact fishing, to establish regional forums—the Minister has referred to that in regard to the Irish sea—to encourage, through the reformed common fisheries policy, an increased regional

dimension, and to bring about a medium-term joined-up policy based on a clear vision and the introduction of multi-annual quotas for future years.

6.45 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): It is a long time since I spoke in a fisheries debate. Although I shall vote with the Government, I can tell the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) that I have some sympathy with his amendment. I think that he and the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) were absolutely right to tell my hon. Friend the Minister that our fishermen were being asked yet again to swallow a bitter pill because of what I consider to be a lousy common fisheries policy.

I must tell the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), with great respect, that I, too, have some experience of the industry, but my experience is a little different from his. I am the son of a fisherman and a fishhouse lass. When the right hon. Gentleman and his Administration were mishandling the fisheries dispute between the United Kingdom and Iceland—popularly known as the cod war—three of my brothers were fishing on trawlers off the Icelandic coast and facing the dangers of wire cutting. I can tell him from personal experience—because I was up there as well—that wire cutting was very dangerous for the lads who were on the decks of those trawlers.

Coming, as I do, from a fishing community, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman something else, again with great respect. Many members of our fishing communities feel that his Administration sold the pass when they took us into the European Economic Community, because the common fisheries policy and, more important, our fishing industry were used as a bargaining counter. Unfortunately, the right hon. Gentleman's Administration and his officials were too ready to listen to the representatives of the British Trawler Federation, which represented only the trawler companies on the Humber and, to a lesser extent, in Aberdeen.

The interests of the share fishermen, in communities throughout the United Kingdom—in Northern Ireland, the Shetland Islands and in Cornwall, for instance—were disregarded in the right hon. Gentleman's honourable drive to take us into what was then the EEC. Since those days, my brothers have been on the dole for many years, together with many friends and many other relations, and I blame his Government for that.

As one who was born into a fishing community, and has stayed with the industry all his life, I can tell the House that successive Administrations, both Labour and Conservative, have let our fishermen down. In the 1960s and 1970s, they behaved with appalling arrogance to the small nation of Iceland when we were involved in that fisheries dispute. Our fishermen are still suffering the aftermath—the unintended consequences—of British arrogance towards a nation that was wholly dependent on the catching and processing of fish for the livelihood of its communities, from Akureyri in the north to the Vestmannaeyjar Islands in the south. A deal could have been done; indeed, the right hon. Gentleman struck a deal with the Icelanders. All that led to the common fisheries policy. Our communities still suffer because the right hon. Gentleman's Administration sold the pass.

As I said earlier, we must be fair-minded: Labour Administrations have not done much better by our fishing industry. That was always the view of my late mother, who first worked "on the herring" when she was 13. She did not have much regard for Labour or Conservative Administrations; she lost a brother and a brother-in-law at sea. We, too, have some experience of the industry, perhaps more than the right hon. Gentleman.

Respect has been paid to the fishermen. A character in Scott's novel "The Antiquary" says—my Scottish friends will forgive me for the accent; my grandmother came from Aberdeen, but I did not—"It's not fish you're buying, but men's lives." That is precisely the case. I hate the fact that fishermen go out in bad weather to fish. I was brought up in a community where, if the ice room was empty or half empty, skippers would shoot the gear in very bad weather, often resulting in deck hands being knocked overboard, as happened to two school friends of mine, Harry and Terry Williams.

My hon. Friend the Minister should listen to what the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) said. If a share fisherman cannot fish because of heavy weather, he should not be denied a legitimate claim for jobseeker's allowance. I hope that a Labour Government will do something about that. I do not want men fishing, shooting the gear and having to work on deck in anything over a force 6.

If I push other hon. Members out of the debate, they will have to forgive me because it is a long time since I have spoken on the issue and I do not think that we sufficiently discuss the safety concerns of our fishermen. My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned safety grants, as did the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss)—it is a bit different from our usual exchanges over Northern Ireland, but I welcome him to his post. Can safety grants be used to purchase survival suits?

I shall ask my hon. Friend a question. He will not be able to answer it tonight, but I would welcome a letter, with a copy put in the Library. What proportion of our fishing vessels carries survival suits for their crew members? If we are to talk about safety grants, as the Minister did, that issue will be critical. I shall give an example. A friend's trawler went down off St. Kildare a few years ago—in the month of February—with a crew of 27. The men who were on watch had time to put on their survival suits. The lads who were down below went over the side in their underwear or pyjamas. Some of the men with survival suits survived for almost four hours in freezing waters—the lads who had to go over the side in their simmits and drawers were dead literally within minutes. My view is—and the fishermen's organisations know it—that no fishing vessel should be allowed out to sea without survival suits for all crew members. My hon. Friend needs to look at that in terms of safety grants.

I think that I am right in saying that no French trawler whose overall length is 15 m or more can leave port without survival suits. The Minister and his ministerial colleagues have been informed by Brussels that survival suits should be carried. I should like him to examine the matter.

Another question comes to mind in relation to our fishermen, who follow that most hazardous of occupations. When will financial compensation be paid to former trawler company employees? Does my hon. Friend have an answer for me tonight? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) and others, including the Minister himself, have pursued that issue.

[Dr. Norman A. Godman]

Men who were put out of work saw their employers given money. The right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) gave a lot of money to Humber trawler owners by way of compensation, but the crews did not get a penny. That injustice—many of the crews are in their 60s and 70s—should be remedied.

The motion refers—my hon. Friend mentioned it—to regional management. The Opposition amendment talks about national management. That is nonsense, but I should like to know what the Government's definition of regional management is. I wrote a paper on it for the Scottish government yearbook of 1975; my hon. Friend the Minister might like to read it.

My view is that with regional management comes local preference. It is a difficult issue because it means giving local fishermen preference over nomadic fishermen—not just from other countries, but from the same country; from other parts of Scotland. There will be conflicts among the nation's fishermen—for example, those in Ullapool and those whom the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) represents—but, if we are to talk about regional management, we will have to talk about protecting local fishing communities against the depredations of big trawler operators—against beam trawlers. I would ban beam trawling if I had my way. We have to protect those communities, many of which are far removed from London; they are far removed even from Edinburgh.

That is the problem with the review of the common fisheries policy in 2002, which my hon. Friend mentioned. What will we do about regional management? Will we give autonomy to local fisheries committees of one sort or another? Looking at Brussels, I do not think that we have a cat in hell's chance of having regional management that protects the local indigenous industry from nomadic fishermen, who are often not concerned about preserving the stock that they are dipping into and then disappearing over the horizon.

Another question arises from the review of the common fisheries policy. Have applicant countries that are seeking to join the European Union—obviously, I am talking about the maritime nations—been told that they will play no part in the CFP review? Let us not forget the Polish fleet.

Mr. Salmond: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. From memory, we were promised full-day fishing debate and then the Government promised a half-day fishing debate without a ministerial statement. Is there anything—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman has raised a matter that has nothing to do with the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Salmond: That is the point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you do anything from the Chair to avoid the farce of an annual fishing debate in which only seven Members get to speak?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Dr. Godman: I am about to finish, anyway—*[Laughter.]* I thought that I heard someone shout, "Daytripper" to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan. I assure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it was not me, although he might be seen as a daytripper to this place. I would have thought that this place is as important to him and to his hon. Friends as the Scottish Parliament.

The safety of our fishermen should be paramount, and the Minister and his colleagues should not ever forget that. I say that against the background of a lousy common fisheries policy.

Amendment proposed: To leave out from "House" to end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'in taking note of the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum, submitted by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, on 5th December 1999, recalls that the previous Government added to the burden on UK fishing communities and failed to take any decisive action to protect British fishing interests in 18 years; believes that the Government should establish a coherent joined-up vision of where the UK wants the fishing industry to be in the medium and long term; recommends that the Government both itself and in its negotiations with European and other fishing nations seeks: to develop arrangements which significantly improve the cooperative relationship between fishermen and scientists, to avoid the last-minute annual total allowable catch and quota-setting process which does much to damage this relationship and the ability of the industry to plan ahead, to bring forward proposals to regularise and manage the trading of track records and fishing licences, to establish a decentralised system based on regional fisheries management whilst seeking to reduce the need for discards and engage fishermen in management decisions, to ensure equality of monitoring and enforcement across the European Union, to develop a pan-European policy to encourage low-impact fishing methods, and to reinstate a system of fishing safety grants.'.—*[Mr. Andrew George.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 36, Noes 320.

Division No. 17] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Burnett, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davis, Cynog
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Rendel, David
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. Bob Russell.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald

Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike

Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

It being after Seven o'clock, MR DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the remaining Questions necessary to dispose of the proceedings, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Amendment proposed: To leave out from "future" to end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"and believes that this can only be achieved by negotiating a reform of the Common Fisheries Policy that will devolve power to national, regional and local levels."—*[Mr. Moss.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 131, Noes 347.

Division No. 18] **[7.12 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coiman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara

Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum, submitted by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 5th December 1999, relating to the fixing of fishing opportunities for 2000 and certain conditions under which they may be fished; recognises that many fish stocks remain in poor shape and need to be rebuilt for the future; and supports the Government's intention to negotiate the best possible fishing opportunities for UK fishermen consistent with the sustainable management of stocks, effective enforcement and the need to ensure that the regional differences of fisheries and their communities are fully recognised.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 108 (Welsh Grand Committee (sittings)),

That the Order of the House of 30th November relating to the meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee on Tuesday 14th December shall have effect with the substitution of the words 'half past Ten o'clock and between Four o'clock and Six o'clock' for the words 'half past Ten o'clock'—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

Adjournment (Christmas)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

7.26 pm

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I wish to raise the issue of Cyprus. I chair the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Cyprus group in this Parliament, a group made up of Members from all of the main parties in this House.

Next year will be the 26th year in which the Republic of Cyprus has been a divided island, occupied by troops of a foreign power—namely, Turkey. Cyprus is a Commonwealth country, and the United Kingdom is one of the guarantor powers for Cyprus. This in itself shows to many people the inability of many countries, including the UK, to resolve this long-running tragedy.

Cyprus is a small and beautiful country. For more than 25 years, nearly one third of the territory of the island of Cyprus has been occupied. It is the only country in Europe that is divided. The capital city, Nicosia, is divided by a wall, barbed wire and troop emplacements. All who walk along the dividing line have the same thought—why, after 25 years, is this island still divided? How do we allow a Commonwealth country to suffer as, sadly, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots suffer from this divide?

Since 1974, there have been countless meetings in Cyprus, London and the United States, and many meetings of the United Nations Security Council. Resolutions have been passed that clearly outline the views of the United Nations on what should be the basis for a settlement to this long-running tragedy.

Many promises have been made. One has only to think of the promise made many years ago for the return of Famagusta—a town that is still deserted some 25 years after the invasion. Once, it was one of the most beautiful towns in Cyprus. Yet the promise made by Mr. Denktas, the leader of the Turkish Cypriots, to return that town has never been honoured, any more than the resolutions passed by the United Nations have been honoured.

Report after report has stated clearly that, under successive presidents of the Republic of Cyprus since the invasion, there has always been a willingness to enter into meaningful talks. Regrettably, however, that has always been refused by Mr. Denktas and so, sadly, we have got nowhere.

Mr. Denktas, fully supported by Turkey and the Turkish army, plays by his own rules of non-co-operation. Thousands of Turkish settlers—no one knows the correct number—have come from mainland Turkey to live in the occupied area of northern Cyprus. At the same time, thousands of Turkish Cypriots have left the country.

In a debate such as this, it is interesting to highlight the views of the countries of the world. After some 25 years, the only country that recognises the so-called independent state of northern Cyprus is Turkey. No other country in the world does so.

I referred to the many meetings held over the past 25 years to try and find a settlement. At the G7 meeting at Cologne earlier this year, the heads of Government issued a statement calling for the President of the Republic of Cyprus, President Clerides, and Mr. Denktas to meet to discuss the grounds for a settlement. I and many other hon. Members warmly welcome that commitment by the G7 countries.

The group that I chair has always made it clear that we want a settlement in which the rights and security of Turkish Cypriots will be just as important as those of Greek Cypriots. Guarantees to that effect should be written into any such settlement.

The talks called for by the G7 nations have started. Discussion is, sadly, slow, but the deadlock is of long standing, so we must accept that the talks will take a long time and be difficult. However, the House, the United Nations and other countries involved in the Cyprus problem must be clear that the settlement that we hope to achieve must be based on the resolutions passed by the UN. Those resolutions require that Cyprus must remain a single sovereignty, that there must be total withdrawal of all Turkish troops, and that all refugees who so wish must have the right to return to their homes. The resolutions also call for the final resolution of the fate of the missing people, and state that there can be no recognition for a separate Turkish state in any part of the island of Cyprus.

I have referred to the repeated willingness of the President of the Republic of Cyprus to enter into meaningful talks on any aspect of a settlement. Cyprus is now a candidate for membership of the European Union, and it has every right to be considered. Its economy is far stronger than that of many of the other applicant countries now under consideration.

President Clerides has called repeatedly on Mr. Denktas to join in the discussions about the EU membership application. Regrettably, Mr. Denktas has refused on every occasion. I hope that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, and my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, will fully support Cyprus's application for membership of the European Union. I hope, too, that they will make it clear to Mr. Denktas and the Turkish Government that they have no veto over Cyprus's application.

The events of the past few days have altered considerably the issues surrounding a settlement in Cyprus. At the weekend, the Helsinki conference of European Union heads of Government decided to invite Turkey to attend meetings to discuss its possible EU membership. The House knows how much Turkey wants that to happen, and I have no doubt that, in time, Turkey will have a role in the EU. However, I hope that the Government will be at the forefront of those telling Turkey what is expected of it.

European Union membership sets very clear rules. Countries must respect human rights and have no political prisoners. Above all, however, their troops should not divide and occupy another European country.

I understand that the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr. Ecevit, attended the European Union meeting in Helsinki. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did not forget that it was the same Mr. Ecevit who said not so long ago that there was no Cyprus problem, and that

"the invasion and occupation of northern Cyprus solved the issue."

I hope that the leaders of the European Union will leave Mr. Ecevit in no doubt that membership of the European Union will bring responsibilities and clear obligations to resolve disputes and conflicts. No dispute requires resolution more than that over Cyprus.

We in the United Kingdom can never say, "It's sad, we hope the problem will be resolved, but it isn't our responsibility." It certainly is our responsibility. As I said, Cyprus is a Commonwealth country, and the United Kingdom is one of its guarantor powers. I hope that, in the coming weeks, we will be in the forefront of those countries supporting the Republic of Cyprus and working towards a settlement there. Such a settlement will bring benefits to the country and its people, be they Turkish Cypriots or Greek Cypriots.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. May I explain to the House that a number of Back Benchers wish to speak and that brief contributions would therefore be appreciated.

7.38 pm

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): I shall certainly adhere to your request for brevity, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I wish to raise the subject of policing levels in Hampshire. My contribution arises from my experience as a local Member of Parliament, and from recent headlines in the Chandler's Ford and Romsey newspapers. Examples of those headlines include "Safety Fears as Police Shortages Affect Local Residents", "Bobbies Cut as Shops Face Vandal Problem", and "Precinct Folk Frightened". Another story, headed "Police Cuts Row", had a sub-headline describing how angry traders feared more vandalism if police officers were transferred elsewhere in the district.

Many hon. Members will be familiar with such headlines in their local press. In my constituency, they have been prompted by the anger felt by shop traders in Chandler's Ford's troubled central shopping precinct in Bournemouth road. They are angry that police officers are to be transferred from that area to make good personnel shortages elsewhere. As reported in the *Southern Daily Echo*, they complain that the precinct is "a magnet for vandals" and say that matters

"will only get worse if fewer police are on patrol."

I think that all hon. Members would agree with that. The article continued:

"In the past few months, gangs of youths and young girls have vandalised seating, upturned concrete plant pots, scrawled graffiti on buildings and verbally abused anyone who has challenged them.

"Several shops have regularly had windows smashed, takeaway food has been smeared over windows and rubbish and excrement pushed through letterboxes. In some cases, attempts have been made to set fire to items pushed through doors."

Such stories show how bad the situation is.

On 29 November, the Home Secretary launched his crime-reduction strategy and stated that the Government had embarked on a crusade against crime. Laudable though the aims of the strategy may be, I am having difficulty in relating them to what is happening on the ground. Page 2 of the strategy's summary refers to:

"a new ring-fenced crime fighting fund part of which will be used to enable forces to recruit, train and pay 5,000 new officers, over and above the number that forces would otherwise have recruited, over the next three years and commencing in April 2000."

I suggest that it is a little optimistic to promise to increase our police forces by 5,000 new officers when there are 3,000 gaps in the thin blue line every day due to unfilled vacancies and sickness. Still, the Home Secretary has challenged police authorities to agree plans for more bobbies on the beat, and, if they meet their targets, they will receive more money from the Home Office.

About half our police force funding comes from council tax payers, with the other half coming from the Home Office. In recent years, Hampshire is fortunate to have received additional grants of £2.7 million to enable it to increase its police establishment by 222 full-time equivalent police officers, bringing its total establishment up to 3,491. But the force is currently 66 constables short. That may not seem a lot, but, coupled with the pressures that officers are under, it has a significant impact on the area.

Superintendent Tribe, the divisional commander in the Eastleigh police station, which serves my constituency, says:

"Our problem lies in that we are supposed to be all things to all people. We are expected to provide anything from a traditional policing with a 'bobby on the beat' that people know and recognise to a round-the-clock emergency service response. The public, rightly, has increasingly high expectations of our performance and we are constantly having to expand into new areas."

He cites establishing a dedicated domestic violence officer, as well as

"sending officers into school to help prevent the children from getting into trouble, and in Hampshire we are participating in the new Youth Offenders Team pilot with probation officers and youth workers."

For all that extra work, over and above normal requirements, the Hampshire police authority receives no additional resources.

If my constituents want more bobbies on the beat, the Hampshire police authority will have to meet the Home Secretary's challenge. Council tax payers will have to pay more, or cuts will be made elsewhere in Hampshire county council's budget. Even if the establishment is increased, we must find suitable recruits and retain more police officers.

I do not think that police officers are paid enough, and that applies to many other forces in the south-east. On appointment, a police officer receives £16,635 per annum, which rises to £18,612 after one year. That salary is not attractive enough to compete with commercial and other industrial employment in a prosperous part of the country—my constituency has virtually full employment. Moreover, in such an economically sound area, there is more to steal. Although recorded crime figures are decreasing—following the trend started in the previous Government's term of office—an awful lot of crime, such as the vandalism and thuggishness that I mentioned, is not reported.

I have three or four points to raise, and should be grateful for the Government's view. First, what about having a differential in rates of pay for police constables across the country? I am told that there is no problem in recruiting police officers on Merseyside and in similar areas of high unemployment. Recruitment is particularly difficult in the south-east and I think that the tripartite police negotiating board on pay and conditions of service should consider that possibility.

Secondly, we must think again about housing allowance. When I first started taking an interest in the police, officers were provided with dedicated housing, which they retained throughout their service. The housing has all gone—a victim, perhaps, of the right to buy.

[Mr. Michael Colvin]

Had that legislation excluded police houses, they might have been retained, but that chance has been lost. I am not suggesting a return to such provision, because buying the housing would be expensive. We could, however, reintroduce the housing allowance. It was phased out at the same time as dedicated houses, and reintroducing it would make the job much more attractive, particularly to police officers' families. It would improve retention as well as recruitment.

Thirdly, we should think again about reintroducing police cadets. I believe that the Metropolitan police force still has cadet units. There is no doubt that the Territorial Army units' sponsorship of local cadet forces has helped to recruit youngsters into the armed forces. The same can be said of the police forces, and local police authorities might like to reconsider whether there is merit in reintroducing police cadets to build up the ethos of both public service and service in the police forces.

Fourthly, we should look at the retirement rules. At present, police officers retire after 30 years of service, or when they are 55. There is a provision for that age limit to be extended to 60 if applicants wish it and if they have a good service record. Many jobs can be done by people over the age of 60. I am one such person and, looking round the Chamber, I can see plenty of others over the age of 60 who are still contributing to society by serving their constituents in Parliament. I do not see why police officers should be forced to retire at 60 when they could probably come off the beat and go into an office, with all the experience gained from their years of service, and continue to add to the establishment of the police force.

Finally, there should be more special constables back on the beat, as they have an enormous contribution to make. First, they are volunteers, so they are dedicated to the task of policing. Secondly, they are free—we do not pay them. They receive a free uniform and their expenses are covered. Most importantly, they have strong local community links. That is the real value of a bobby on the beat. In addition to the 3,500-odd police in our establishment in Hampshire, there are another 700 special constables, and I only wish that there were more.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): When visiting my local police station, I discovered that many special constables want to see what the police force is like, with a view to joining it later. Allowing special constables to have that role would be useful in recruiting police.

Mr. Colvin: That could well have been my fifth point. My hon. Friend makes a most valuable contribution. Job tasting is an important part of recruitment and could be tried in the armed forces as well as the police service. Some Members of Parliament who are taking part in the armed forces scheme may be tempted from this place to serve their country in other areas.

In conclusion, I do not want to give the impression that Hampshire is a lawless place. It is not. Recorded crime continues to go down, following the trend established in the previous Government's term of office, but we do not know how much unrecorded crime there is. We do know, however, that there is a problem right across the south-east of England in recruiting and retaining the very high-quality police officers to whom we have become accustomed. I hope that my suggestions will be listened to seriously by the Government, and I look forward to hearing their response in due course.

7.49 pm

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): My reason for speaking is to try to prevent an impending deadlock over the sale and redevelopment of the former Wolverhampton Royal hospital in my constituency. As we speak, important decisions are being made about the site's future, and the situation is not hopeful.

The former hospital is a grade 2 listed building in the middle of Wolverhampton. It dominates the All Saints area, and is situated in one of the most deprived wards of the west midlands. The area has been subject to regeneration initiatives for some years. The decision to close the hospital was taken in the early 1990s and was controversial, partly because the hospital contained the town's accident and emergency services, but partly because it was held in great affection. I was against closure, but by the time of the general election in 1997, the plan was too far advanced to be reversed. It seemed a more positive use of energy to seek to ensure that redevelopment would benefit local people and the whole of Wolverhampton.

From the outset, Wolverhampton council and the local community made it clear that the site's redevelopment required what planning jargon refers to as mixed use. In other words, there could certainly be commercial development that would bring in money, but there must also be social housing and facilities for local people. The redevelopment of the hospital site was seen as the focus of the area's regeneration, and the plans were enshrined in a document titled "Royal Hospital Development Area—Wolverhampton Town Centre Urban Village". The plans were also included in the council's unitary development plan, and were subsequently approved by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, a point to which I shall return.

When the hospital was handed over to estates officials of the national health service executive for disposal, they were made aware of the plans and of what the town, the council and the local people wanted. The site was first marketed in 1998, but that attempt was not successful. A second attempt to market the site occurred earlier this year. In between the two, I facilitated a round-table meeting in All Saints involving residents, council officials, councillors, churches, schools, voluntary groups, housing associations and the NHS executive. The purpose of the meeting was to highlight the expectations of the local community and the council, and to make officials aware of what people wanted from redevelopment. After the meeting, everyone was positive, feeling that a greater understanding of the community's needs had been achieved.

However, the result of the second attempt to market the hospital site has been disappointing. The NHS executive seems likely to agree to a food superstore. That option does not fulfil the needs of local people and, as it is counter to the council's unitary development plan, it probably will not receive planning permission. There is a supermarket 200 yd away, so the proposal does not seem to make sense, and the council has already earmarked a further site within half a mile of the hospital for a food superstore.

The reaction of the NHS executive officials is that Government guidelines bind them to achieving the best value for money deal. The hospital has been closed for two years. The building has been vandalised. The executive has changed its security firm three times, and the costs of patrolling the building are likely to run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. If the executive goes ahead with the plan for a food superstore, the council will probably not give planning permission, and we shall be locked into appeals to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The local community will campaign against the development, and the hospital building could stand empty for at least another year.

I have written to the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), to outline the problem. I asked whether his officials might be able to exercise discretion in the disposal of the site so that we could achieve mixed use. I wrote to my hon. Friend at the end of October and have not yet had a reply, although I am fairly confident that I shall receive one soon.

A food superstore is not what we need. My constituents and the rest of Wolverhampton deserve a lot better. The hospital was originally built and maintained by public subscription. The people of Wolverhampton built that hospital. It would not be acceptable if the NHS executive walked away from the site with maximum financial gain and without contributing to regeneration of the immediate area. I ask my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office to pass on my message to my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health, and, although I know that the latter is busy, I would like a reply to my letter.

A wider issue is at also stake. I cannot understand why a plan accepted by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions appears to be being thwarted by the criteria applied by the Department of Health—perhaps some joined-up government is needed.

7.56 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I am sorry to start on a carping note, but I regret the absence of the Leader of the House this evening. Those of us who served in previous Parliaments recall the tradition that the Leader of the House should attend this debate. That was a good tradition, and I hope that the practice is reinstated.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise two constituency matters that have a wider import. The first is the availability of beta interferon in Lincolnshire health authority's area. The second is funding of Lincolnshire police, on which I shall make some remarks not dissimilar to those of my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin).

My interest in beta interferon arises from my concern about two constituents. I do not think it right to name them, so I shall call them N and E for the purposes of the debate. Both are young ladies in their late 20s, who have recently developed multiple sclerosis. Both have been seen by general practitioners and have been referred to the consultant neurologist responsible for decisions in this area, to whom I shall refer as Professor B. He is responsible for identifying those among those referred to him who would benefit from beta interferon.

In both cases, Professor B concluded that my constituents would benefit from beta interferon. Having regard to their ages, he concluded that the treatment would be particularly appropriate. In a letter to the health authority concerning N, he wrote:

"Here is another patient with very active multiple sclerosis who is having frequent attacks and a high risk of significant disability. She has had six attacks in the last 12 months. As we have no currently available funding in Lincolnshire Health for incidence cases I would be grateful if you would let me know when additional funding will be made available for patients like"

N. He continued:

"We now know that treatment as early as possible in the disease course is critical in order to avoid long-term disability and I would be grateful if you can support additional funding for such patients."

In respect of patient E, her GP wrote:

"The only available treatment for relapsing and remitting multiple sclerosis is beta interferon, which is indicated for the reduction of frequency and the degree of severity of clinical relapses. It is only effective if given in the early stages of the disease process. It is imperative that she receives the best treatment available. Clearly, at present this is not the situation. As her GP, she has my complete authoritative support and I think that the health authority should be responsible for and fund her treatment."

I regret to say that funding is not available. Lincolnshire health authority has ring-fenced a budget of £200,000, and it adopts the position that it cannot go beyond that sum. Mr. Jeavons of the health authority wrote to me about its policy. His letter stated:

"Within the fixed sum available only Consultant Neurologists can judge which patients will benefit the most from treatment, and thus should receive priority. We cannot increase our level of funding for beta interferon because we face many competing demands for resources, most notably the rapidly rising demand for emergency medical admissions."

That is profoundly unsatisfactory.

Budgetary constraints operating in Lincolnshire—and, no doubt, elsewhere—actively prevent the prescribing of drugs to those for whom the clinical neurologist recommends them. A letter to me from the professor makes it plain that one cannot prioritise within the groups of people who satisfy the clinical criteria; all of them are equally eligible and would benefit to a like degree.

That is a clear example of rationing by budget—I have no doubt that it is true elsewhere.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right to point out that there are similar problems elsewhere. This morning, I received a most disturbing letter from a constituent who complained of rationing not by budget but by postcode. I understand that my health authority has no budget at all for beta interferon.

Mr. Hogg: I am sorry to hear that. In another letter to me, the professor pointed out that, because of budgetary constraints, perhaps only one in six of the patients who would benefit from beta interferon is receiving it.

Ultimately, the Government are responsible and I am entitled to know where they stand on the following options. The first would be to do nothing but simply say, "Well, that's tough. Too bad, we are not going to do anything." If that is the Government's position, we should know. Secondly, they could tell the Lincolnshire health authority to allocate more money to the budget. The authority would then have to move money from another

[Mr. Hogg]

spending head. Is that the Government's position? Thirdly, the Government could say that they will allocate more money to the health authority. If that is their position, we should know about it. If that is not their position, we should know why.

For aught I know, there are various other possibilities, but it is the Government's business to tell us what the alternatives are. I realise that the Minister is not able to comment in detail; I do not blame him for that. The Leader of the House would also be unable to comment in detail. However, the Minister could tell his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health that the House is entitled to a considered reply to the points that I have made. I trust that he will persuade his right hon. Friend to write to me and, furthermore, that a letter will be placed in the Library.

In relation to the funding of the Lincolnshire police, we find that rural areas are being disadvantaged under the Labour Government. There are two general points. First, the number of police in the county is lower than when the Conservatives were in office. In April 1997, we had 1,214 constables in Lincolnshire. A year later, in April 1998, the number had risen by four. In April 1999, there were 1,165 constables—a decrease of 49 since 1997. I suspect that that is matched in many shire forces.

Secondly, Lincolnshire receives the second lowest grant per head of the population. In consequence, as in the situation described by my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey, council tax payers in my constituency are paying about 34 per cent. more than the average rate. As all those Members who represent rural areas are well aware, the problem is sparsity. For obvious reasons, it costs much more to provide a police service in a sparsely populated region. I need not go into the reasons, as they will be well known to those who are interested in the matter.

I am not usually fair to the Government, but in this case I will be and will point out that, in April 1998, the Home Office commissioned ORH Ltd. to produce a report, which was received in May 1999. A letter sent by the Home Office to police authorities stated that the working party to whom the consultants had reported found that there was a serious sparsity factor. The consultants recommended a heavy shift in spending priorities to take account of the sparsity factor in the formula. In Lincolnshire, that would increase the cash by about £2 million, or about 3 per cent. That is a significant amount in a budget of about £60 million. That is important.

In September, I received a letter from the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), in which he stated, in effect, that there was problem but that the Government were not in a position to address it. Indeed, they could not give me any guarantee for the next three years.

Plainly, in Lincolnshire, we have too few policemen—fewer than there were two years ago. It is acknowledged that sparsity is a serious factor, but the Government completely refuse to pay any attention to the report that they commissioned and which has been endorsed by the Home Office working party. That is profoundly unsatisfactory. I realise that the Minister will not be able to give me a considered reply—even the Leader of the House would not be able to do so. I do not complain about that. However the Minister can certainly draw my remarks to the attention of his right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and suggest that a considered and sympathetic response would be in order. A copy of that letter should go to the Library of the House.

Mr. Colvin: I draw the attention of the House and of my right hon. and learned Friend to the excellent Adjournment debate initiated by our right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) on 2 December on the policing of rural areas. Our right hon. Friend listed the 14 police authorities—including Lincolnshire—which face the problem described by my right hon. and learned Friend and which have jointly lobbied the Home Office. I recommend that my right hon. and learned Friend joins forces with those authorities and perhaps he will receive a better answer from the Minister of State, Home Office than our right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon received on 2 December.

Mr. Hogg: I should put it differently—they might join forces with me. Lincolnshire is one of the counties that suffer most acutely. It is perfectly true that 14 forces are affected by the sparsity factor. They are referred to in the ORH Ltd. report and by the Home Office working party.

In respect of the police and beta interferon, we must acknowledge that those who live in rural areas are being disadvantaged by the Government. Those of us who represent those people must ensure that the whole country knows and understands that.

8.8 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): The debate gives us the opportunity to raise grievances that have not been dealt with. I demand redress for my constituent, Andrea Morgan. Some months ago, I raised her case in a debate on myalgic encephalomyelitis—ME—initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright). At that time, I believed that, after a long struggle, the case had been resolved.

However, tragically, the sorry tale of a bureaucracy pursuing a lengthy and virulent campaign of harassment against my constituent continues, because, although she suffers from ME, she has dared to stand up for her right to fair treatment from the local authority. Since the Lawrence inquiry, there has been much debate about institutional racism. Andrea Morgan's case is an example of institutional discrimination on grounds of disability. I hope that, by exposing the case again, I will halt in its tracks the campaign against her by the malevolent bureaucracy of the London borough of Hillingdon. I shall explain what can happen to people with disabilities if they dare to demand fairness and justice.

The background is that Andrea was an employee of the London borough of Hillingdon. Ironically, her post was to assist long-term unemployed people—especially those with disabilities—to return to work. After six years, she was redeployed within the council to assist members of the public with their problems—providing information, advice and assistance. She was generally considered to be good at her job—competent, committed and sensitive to the needs of the community.

In January 1997, Andrea was taken ill and eventually, in May 1997, she was admitted to hospital after collapsing, and was diagnosed as suffering from ME.

The full details of the condition were outlined in a report by Dr. Sevitt, the Hillingdon hospital consultant. Andrea was treated by her general practitioner and was in regular contact with Dr. Thompson, health adviser to the London borough of Hillingdon.

Andrea Morgan is a worker, not a shirker. She is keen to get back to work as soon as possible, and was so at that time. So Andrea herself arranged appointments with the borough's health adviser, which produced in September 1997 from that adviser, Dr. Thompson, the following advice to the London borough of Hillingdon personnel department:

"If at all possible she would be able, from a medical point of view, to start work at home with a view to a slowly graded return to work, which can only be decided in terms of her symptoms."

The doctor continued:

"I would be grateful if you could let me know if this would be possible."

No response was received from Hillingdon, despite Andrea's phone calls and messages left in the personnel department, so, in November 1997, a further memo was sent by Dr. Thompson to the personnel department, saying:

"I would reiterate my last memo of 26 September that Miss Morgan is fit to start work at home when this is possible and that this should be followed by graded return to work in line with her symptoms. It is important that, even though she remains well, the gradation of her return does not increase, and that her symptoms are monitored carefully, as too much too early could cause a recurrence of her symptoms."

There was no response from the borough, so Andrea yet again arranged for an interview. She took with her her GP's note, saying:

"Andrea is now ready to return to work but needs a period of part-time work to ease herself back into routine. I hope that this is possible".

This is a woman struggling to get back into work, despite a severe illness, diagnosed by several doctors, including consultants at Hillingdon hospital and her own GP.

Andrea eventually did return to work, in November 1997, but what did the London borough of Hillingdon do? Was there any assistance for her? No. The borough refused to allow her access to its own recuperation programme. On the day that she returned to work, her own manager was late. There were no arrangements for prior induction. She was set up to fail. She could not cope in those circumstances, and left her employment on that day.

The occupational health adviser informed the council:

"This sort of stress is likely to be detrimental to her health and could quite possibly cause a relapse."

Andrea again tried to return to work. She sought redeployment. She was willing to do everything within her abilities to get back to work, and she was referred to the borough's corporate monitoring panel to match her to any vacancies that arose. Departmental managers were also asked whether they could provide some work for her to do at home. Although in other instances the borough paid other employees a full salary and found them work to do at home, that was not the case for Andrea. It seems that it is all right if one is able-bodied, but not if one has a disability.

Having done nothing to help, the borough's personnel department suggested that Andrea be psychologically tested. In a debate earlier in the year, we heard that many ME sufferers have endured similar treatment. The argument is that they are not sick—that the problem is not physical but psychological. It is the modern-day equivalent of "it is all in the mind" or "it is psychosomatic". It has revealed the attitude of the personnel manager to ME sufferers that they all seem to be classified as "mental malingerers".

Time dragged on. The borough made no real effort to find an appropriate job for Andrea and, in January 1998, after months of trying to get back into work, she could cope no longer and resigned her employment with the borough. In February 1998, Andrea, through her union, Unison, lodged an industrial tribunal application with regard to the borough's treatment of her, on the grounds of discrimination on disability.

In October 1998, the industrial tribunal found unanimously in Andrea's favour. It said:

"The London Borough of Hillingdon unlawfully discriminated against her, a disabled person".

The tribunal did not believe that, in an organisation of 8,000 employees, the borough could not find some work for her to assist in her return to work. It cited numerous examples of other employees who had been assisted in such a way.

What did the borough do? Immediately, in the local paper, it distorted the judgment, claiming that it would appeal because it could not create work for Andrea when there was no work for her to do—a complete distortion of the decision.

The decision should have been an end to the case, and Andrea was looking forward to putting the whole issue behind her and starting a new life, possibly in new employment—but no, bizarrely, the London borough of Hillingdon appealed. Personnel officers lodged their own industrial tribunal appeal application, using the borough's resources. Although that was subsequently denied by the chief executive, I have the paperwork on which they lodged the claims in their own personal names, on London borough of Hillingdon headed paper.

In May 1999, the appeal was dismissed. The personnel officers dropped their own case, and they were refused leave to appeal further by Lord Justice Morison.

In June 1999, the London borough of Hillingdon applied to the Court of Appeal for refusal of leave to be lifted. In November 1999—only a month ago—Mr. Justice Sedley refused leave to appeal and said:

"Even if there were not a second tier appeal requiring particular cogency, I would not consider it a proper case for permission to appeal. It has in my view no real prospect of success."

I understand that, even now, the borough is considering further appeals and further pursuits of this case. In the past year, the borough has settled numerous employee cases at industrial tribunals, and settlements have ranged from £4,000 to £45,000, but in this case it is determined not to settle.

The costs incurred by the borough in pursuing its vendetta against my constituent—a disabled woman—are staggering. They must now amount to more than £100,000—the costs of counsel's opinion, counsel's representation in court, legal officers' advice, personnel officers' advice, occupational health advisers' advice and the administrative tasks involved in this escapade. The matter has been referred to the district auditor, but he seems incapable of investigating the matter.

[Mr. John McDonnell]

I am demanding a full investigation by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I believe that, if there have been issues of unreasonable behaviour, the district auditor should surcharge officers and, if necessary, members in this case. What we have on our hands is a grubby, hurtful conspiracy to victimise my constituent, which should not go unrecorded and must be remedied. That is what these debates are for—to draw attention to that type of disgraceful behaviour by a public body.

8.17 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am most grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on matters to be considered before the Christmas Adjournment—or, perhaps more apocalyptically, matters to be considered before the end of the millennium. It may be the right moment to place on the record my appreciation of the efforts of the bodies in my constituency to celebrate the millennium.

I shall not be polite about the dome—I shall be entirely consistent on that matter. I have been rude before and I shall be rude again, and I suspect that, as a result, I am not on the Christmas card list of the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I am talking about the individual community efforts that are taking place throughout the country—small-scale schemes in villages and small towns, which have much to commend them. I think of the church bell schemes—I saw some instituted in Isle Abbotts recently. I think of millennium greens. I think of the excellent work done on Jack and Jill hill—the hill that Jack and Jill went up to fetch their pail of water, in Kilmersdon in my constituency—which has now been reconstituted by the efforts of local people. All are excellent schemes.

I do not intend to spend my entire time in congratulating my constituents, tempting though that is. Instead, I shall address a serious matter, which I believe that the House should consider, and should consider time and again in the next few months. That is the very real threat that has been posed by the Government's actions to rural sub-post offices—and urban post offices because they will face the same dangers.

I do not believe that the Government have grasped the scale of the problem. They cannot have grasped the extent to which people are concerned about the threat to their local sub-post offices. They realise, if the Government do not, that half our rural sub-post offices could disappear in the next few years, as a result of Government actions. Regrettable is not a sufficient word to describe that. It would be worse than a decimation.

I am indebted to the actions of our major regional newspaper, the *Western Daily Press*, which has been running a vigorous campaign on the issue. If Ministers need proof of how upset people are about the issue, they need only look at the coverage in the *Western Daily Press* and consider the number of people who are queueing up to sign a petition in their tens—I think hundreds—of thousands. People are even demanding a petition in their sub-post office, if there is not already one there, so that they may add their name to the list.

I had a valuable meeting with the postmasters and postmistresses from the smaller post offices in my constituency. It took place at 2 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon when most of them were trying to run their businesses. My constituency is large—it can take an hour and a quarter to drive from the far end of it to Frome where the meeting was held—but, despite all that, the postmasters and postmistresses were there in number. The majority were represented and they were unanimous in their view. Every one of them saw the Government's plans as a threat to their businesses over the next few years.

I do not dispute that the Government's proposals for automation will unlock potential in sub-post offices. I want that to happen and I want such post offices to extend the range of services that they provide. However, the Government's plans for the payments of benefits and pensions and for the changeover to automated credit transfer will have a simultaneous and opposite effect. It represents a real threat to those businesses. I am told that up to 35 per cent. of the turnover of the post offices in my constituency comes from the payment of pensions and benefits and that, in urban areas, that figure can rise even higher. However, post offices will lose not just that business, which they undertake on an agency basis, but the added business that goes with it. When people come into a post office to collect their pensions, they do their shopping or pick up a newspaper; they do other business.

Postmasters and postmistresses also see a second threat—a threat to the value of their businesses. Those of them who are thinking of retiring and believe that they have served the community for long enough find it almost impossible to dispose of their businesses in the present climate and with the uncertainty that lies ahead. It is difficult to produce a realistic business plan. If someone wants to buy a post office, he cannot produce a realistic business plan that will satisfy the banks enough to lend him money. They do not know what sort of business will be there in future.

The continuation of such businesses, the loss of jobs and, most of all, the loss of community facilities are real issues. Villages have lost so many things in recent years. Many villages do not have a village shop, post office or pub. However, the Government's proposal is a further threat to village life and it will encourage villages to become dormitories and museums rather than the living communities that we want them to be.

Coupled with the difficulties to the businesses themselves are the difficulties that will be posed to the many people who collect their pensions or benefits from post offices. Pensioners are an important group in that respect, but they are not the only people in that position. Those with disabilities and young mothers who do not have transport of their own may find that the post office is an essential resource if they are to lead their normal lives. They will be placed in an almost impossible position if, at some stage in the future, they cannot use post offices to collect their pensions or benefits.

The answer often given is that such people should use bank accounts. However, there are several problems with forcing people to have bank accounts. First, there is the question whether the clearing banks would be prepared to accept their business. People on low incomes are very often not considered to be good credit risks by banks and credit is often determined by the postcode of where one happens to reside. I foresee real problems. We could end up with the Government having to pay the banks to take the business rather than paying post offices to continue the business that they carry out.

People on low incomes can ill afford the charges on bank accounts. Perhaps Ministers have forgotten the problems in living from hand to mouth and managing a very small budget over a month rather than over a week. It is intensely difficult for people to manage in those circumstances, as any citizens advice bureau and any Member who has held a surgery knows. However, the Government's proposal would take away a facility that enables people to budget more easily.

Transport is another problem. Many people cannot get to a bank. They are airily told that they can use an automated telling machine. However, in some areas of my constituency, the nearest automated telling machine is 30 miles away. How on earth are people supposed to use that? How on earth are they supposed to find the public transport, which does not exist, to get them to a bank, which does not exist, so that they can withdraw the money that is rightfully theirs?

There are also societal problems. Post offices provide a much wider resource than simply paying over money or selling a jar of coffee. They perform a social function that is critical in these days when people are often terribly isolated and find it difficult to meet others. The post office is the place where they meet, do business and can find a friend or a contact who they know will be on their side and who will assist them when they need help.

The Government's suggestion is based on making savings to the social security budget. No one in the House would deny the desirability of making savings on that budget if the money can be used elsewhere. However, those savings should not be made at the expense of people or of individual or community interests.

If the Minister agrees that the post office network is valuable—I believe that it is invaluable—will he tell us how the Government will sustain it to the point that it can benefit from automation? It is no good saying that there will be jam tomorrow if post offices go out of business today. How will the Government help those who rely on post offices for their pensions and benefits? We have heard much about the social exclusion unit, and this job, above all others, is one for that unit. It should provide a strategy to deal with a problem before it is created by a Government who, in this instance, have taken the wrong turning.

8.27 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I associate myself fully with the remarks of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). I am sure that I would not be alone among Labour Members in expressing that view.

I wish to raise two issues that have been brought to my attention by my constituents. The first is the position of slaughterhouses within the rural economy. Over many years, the number of small slaughterhouses serving their own localities has sharply declined. That decline has been hastened by the expression—quite rightly—of new concerns about hygiene and animal welfare. It is proper that such issues should be at the forefront of our minds. However, large operations find it much easier than small family-run businesses to adapt their premises and mode of business to the relevant regulations and changes.

Of course, on top of that we have had the crisis that has emanated from the concern over BSE, the complete collapse of the rendering trade and the collapse of the economies in the far east and Russia, which has deprived producers of an outlet for the sale of hides. The burdens placed on the proprietor of the small slaughterhouse have become greater and greater and his margins have narrowed.

That has a great effect on the rural economy, particularly on farmers. If the local slaughterhouse closes, farmers must transport their beasts much further afield. That has a consequence for them because their costs rise, particularly when fuel prices are high, but it also causes concern about the welfare of the animals being transported. On the one hand, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome said, we are making improvements through modernisation and by being concerned about welfare, but, on the other, we are increasing welfare risks by lengthening the journey time for animals.

That issue is more vividly in my mind because of the actions of the Intervention Board, which recently reduced from 29 to 21 the number of approved slaughterhouses that can operate in contract with the board on the over-30-months scheme. It said in its press handout that the remaining slaughterhouses will be geographically appropriate and the change should not greatly increase the journey time. In East Anglia, there is no contracted, approved slaughterhouse. From 22 December, the slaughterhouse in Brentwood will cease to have a contract, and the venue nearest to East Anglia will be in Derbyshire or Kent. Whatever the ambitions of our Saxon forebears, I never thought that Derbyshire was part of the eastern counties or East Anglia.

That change has exactly the same consequences as the closure of small slaughterhouses: the journey time and distances over which the animals are being transported are enormously lengthened. Indeed, there will be trips of up to 150 miles, some of which will be on country roads, with aged, and in some cases, frail or unwell animals that are subject to the over-30-months scheme. Such journeys can hardly be beneficial to their welfare.

The consequence of the change is, allegedly, that the Intervention Board will save some £5 million. It may well do, but the world is a strange place and, as with all savings, when money is saved in one area, costs seem to crop up somewhere else. As the Intervention Board saves £5 million, the farmers who produce the beasts are laden with the cost of making that saving as they transport their animals further and further to slaughterhouses.

My final point about slaughterhouses relates to the system of double inspection, which I am sure all hon. Members who represent rural areas will have been told about by local producers. Slaughterhouses or, as they are now normally known, abattoirs, are inspected not only by somebody from the Meat Hygiene Service, but by an approved official veterinary surgeon.

Slaughterhouse inspection is not the most attractive occupation for veterinary surgeons, and there is concern that because this country has a shortage of vets who want to undertake what is, in essence, a monotonous and low-level occupation, vets are being brought in from abroad. Their English is often, initially at least, poor, but an agency charges the slaughterhouse a high fee for those vets, which is passed on to the producer.

Many people say to me that they believe that it is unnecessary to have two inspectors present at the same time. I submit that it would be helpful if the Government's red tape working group, which I know is greatly

[Mr. Alan Hurst]

welcomed, could attend to that matter. It could find out where savings could be made and consider how to switch the burden to high-risk areas, where increased supervision might be needed. Where there is a low risk, other approaches could be taken. Tomorrow, we shall hear the first results of the working group's deliberations, and I hope that it will take those matters into account thereafter.

The second matter that I wish to discuss is one that I raised the very first time that I spoke in an Adjournment debate, in the autumn of 1997—the Hatfield Peverel to Witham link road, which is in my constituency. Some hon. Members may have heard of the town of Witham; fewer, perhaps, will have heard of Hatfield Peverel. I suspect that its main claim to fame is that it is the home address of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), but, in our locality, we do not broadcast that fact more often than necessary.

The Hatfield Peverel to Witham link road is an essential feature of transportation safety in that part of Essex. The A12, which runs between Witham and Hatfield Peverel, is notoriously congested and dangerous, and the accident statistics are way above what would be anticipated on that section of road.

I raised this matter in the House in one of my early speeches in the Chamber in autumn 1997. I then went to see the Minister responsible, and I thought that things happened easily and quickly thereafter because I soon had a letter saying that the road, which is only about a mile long, had been approved as one requiring a safety measure, and, that summer, it was incorporated into the roads programme as a minor scheme. In spring 1998, it was referred to the Highways Agency for progress to be made.

The scheme has been in the intended budget of Essex county council for many years, and I am sure that it was pushed in this House by my predecessor and, indeed, by other Members who are greatly concerned. The scheme was announced on safety grounds in January 1998, yet nothing further of any substance has occurred and it is now December 1999.

I have been to see representatives of the Highways Agency, who told me in the spring that substantial progress would be made by July. July has come and gone and we are now in December. Colleagues from the county and district councils have approached the Highways Agency and been told that progress will be made by spring 2000—a vaguer date than July—but still nothing further has occurred.

I raise the matter because I know that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office will have the ear of those concerned. I hope that they will grab by the ear those in the Highways Agency who are responsible for the development of the road. What a dreadful thing it would be if there were further deaths on the road because of the apparent inertia since the safety scheme was announced.

8.36 pm

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I beg to move that this House should not adjourn until it has considered a clear and present danger: nuclear terrorism.

"New York City Under Threat From Iranian-Backed Terrorist Group"

would be an alarming headline, but not one without precedent. If we knew that those terrorists were armed with a primitive nuclear device stolen from a loosely guarded Russian stockpile, it would be the stuff of nightmares. Yet, unknown to most people, that was a genuine threat investigated by the CIA and the FBI only months after the bombing of the World Trade Centre.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has made nuclear terrorism more likely. We rightly fear that terrorists and rogue states might gain access to Russian nuclear weapons and use them, or threaten to use them, against us. Despite Chechnya, it is in our enlightened self-interest to provide generous international financial assistance to Russia in order to reduce that threat.

Incidents of nuclear terrorism have already occurred, though they have received little publicity. In November 1995, the Chechen guerrilla leader, Shamil Basayev, informed Russian television that his group had placed a container of radioactive caesium 137 in the Ismailovo park in Moscow. Although Russian officials subsequently dismissed the threat, the fact that teams were sent around the city with Geiger counters underlines the seriousness with which it was taken at the time.

Another incident occurred in spring 1997, when a blackmailer telephoned the president's office threatening to sabotage a nuclear power plant. According to Russian security services, the threat was not an empty one and there was great relief when the blackmailer was arrested.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threat of nuclear terrorism was virtually non-existent. What the Soviet Union called the

"Nuclear shield of the Motherland",

was one of the state's top funding priorities and was protected from the "Imperialist West" by one of the most efficient police states in the world. Internal security was never seen as a potential threat. Therefore no investment was made in alarm systems, closed circuit television cameras and radiation detectors. It is only in today's Russia of severe budgetary difficulties and widespread corruption that the unthinkable has suddenly become possible.

At times, the lack of concern shown by Russian authorities over nuclear security issues in Russia would be risible if it were not so serious. The northern fleet had its electricity cut off by the local power company for not paying its bills. That action posed a severe risk of a meltdown in one of the fleet's nuclear-powered submarines. In November last year, 20 soldiers of the strategic missile force—the body responsible for guarding nuclear weapons—were discharged as mentally unfit.

With the collapse of the economy, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the Russian Government to fund security measures for civil and military nuclear establishments. Military personnel have been withdrawn from most civilian research and weapons production centres. Those civilian centres must now provide their own security, despite dramatically reduced budgets.

Thousands of former employees who are currently unemployed retain their security passes. Military sites are guarded by soldiers whose pay is often erratic and who must often operate out-dated, if not dangerous, facilities. The results of an official Russian inquiry into conditions at nuclear storage facilities are horrifying.

The 12th main directorate of the Defence Ministry, responsible for security at military nuclear sites, reported that, at one facility, officers and men had not been paid

for three months and had thus suffered malnutrition that was severe enough to cause fainting fits. The officers were forced to borrow money to pay for the protective slippers used when working close to nuclear warheads.

All over Russia there are inadequately guarded facilities. In some places, nuclear materials are stored in no more than glass jars protected only by padlocks. The lack of proper inventories aids potential nuclear proliferation, for, if no one is aware exactly how much uranium or plutonium is stored, it is easy to make unauthorised withdrawals.

Such a scenario prompted President Clinton to authorise what is known as Project Sapphire. That was the covert removal of 600 kg of highly enriched uranium from the Kazak storage facility near the Iranian border. The laxity of the Kazak accounting was underlined by the fact that when the shipment arrived in the United States, it was found to contain 4 per cent. more uranium than that for which the US had paid.

It is not just a matter of future dangers if nothing is done—there is already a small but growing trade in radioactive material. The largest seizure came in August 1994, when 580 g of MOX—mixed oxide, used as fuel in light water reactors—was discovered at Munich airport on a Russian airliner. Of that 580 g, 300 to 350 g was plutonium close to weapons grade. The following year, 8 g of plutonium-239 was discovered on the Swiss border. As the plutonium was more highly enriched than is usually found in nuclear weapons, it is believed to have been smuggled out of the Arzamas-16 research centre.

Nuclear proliferation has three major components: plant, fissile material and personnel. Russia is witnessing a haemorrhage of experienced personnel from the formerly closed nuclear weaponry design and production centres. During the Soviet era, personnel in those secret establishments were some of the best paid and most highly respected members of society. However, since 1991, they have been periodically unpaid for months on end, their salaries have failed to keep pace with inflation even when they have been paid, and they have lost their status.

The situation worsened in April 1998 when the Russian Parliament stopped closed cities, where most of those facilities are located, retaining all taxes collected within their borders, and returned them to dependence on uncertain central Government funding. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that some Russian scientists are tempted to offer their services elsewhere. The average wage for a scientist in one of the closed cities is about $70 a month. Iran is offering up to $5,000 a month to the same people.

The scale of the problem is huge. In 1992, the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy estimated that up to 3,000 former Soviet scientists had a detailed knowledge of nuclear weapon construction. That does not take into account the thousands of other specialists whose knowledge, although not directly related to weapon construction, could still be of use to a state or group looking to produce a nuclear device.

What can be done? The United States has taken the lead. Since its inception in 1991, Congress has appropriated more than $2.2 billion to the Nunn-Lugar co-operative threat reduction programme. The programme has been a success and has made a vital contribution to United States and global security. Under its auspices, 3,300 strategic nuclear warheads were removed from Belarus, Kazakstan and Ukraine, which are now free of nuclear weapons, and 4,700 former Soviet warheads have been removed from strategic weapon systems that used to point west. Hundreds of launchers, missiles and nuclear test tunnels have been destroyed.

It is clear, however, that the scale of the problem is so great that the programme does not go far enough. Russia needs western financial help to assist it to ratify the START 2 treaty. One of the major reasons for Russian delay, apart from nationalist opposition, is the $7.5 billion estimated cost of implementing START 2 for Russia. I suggest that self-interest should prompt the international community to assist with funds for this purpose. If the treaty is not ratified, the United States alone will have to spend $4 billion maintaining weapons that eventually will have to be destroyed.

Secondly, the west must provide money to improve Russia's nuclear safety and security infrastructure. According to General Maskin, head of the Defence Ministry's 12th main directorate, "reliability of personnel" is still a key. Physical security must also be addressed. The co-operative threat reduction programme will provide the Russian military with an automated system to track its nuclear materials. This system should be offered to non-military research establishments and the nuclear power station network. Investment funds must be made available to improve the physical security at nuclear facilities.

Links must be forged between Russian nuclear scientists and their counterparts in the west so that the Russians feel that they are fully integrated into the international scientific community. Russian research facilities should be twinned with American and European centres so that their work can be directed towards civilian research. The United States agreement to buy at least 500 tonnes of highly enriched uranium is an important non-proliferation measure and provides research centres with funds for conversion. Can we not go further? Could we not pay Russia to destroy an increasing part of its nuclear stockpile?

The United States and the international community are facing a huge potential proliferation problem, but one that can be brought under control with sufficient funding. Without further funding, the Russian nuclear weapons complex faces almost certain collapse. That will usher in a free for all among rogue states and terrorist groups, which will then pick up the radioactive pieces.

8.48 pm

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): I return to the issue of Cyprus, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox). I am a member of the various groups that are associated with Cyprus and I have been to Cyprus three times. I have declared this information.

As my hon. Friend said, the United Kingdom has a grave responsibility for the future of Cyprus as a guarantor power. As he also said, a recent decision was made in Helsinki to allow Turkey to become an aspirant member of the European Union. I understand that that was due to the enormous pressure that the United States put on the leadership of the EU. I am concerned about the issue and, in the next two or three minutes, I shall attempt to explain why that is.

[Dr. Rudi Vis]

I shall mention five issues that count against the Turkish state. The first is Cyprus, an issue which my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting presented so well; I shall not repeat his points. The second, which is known to us all, is the unacceptable discrimination of the Turkish state against the Kurdish people. Thirdly, there is the Loizidou case. Hon. Members may ask, "What is the Loizidou case compared with Cyprus and the Kurdish question?" It does not seem as important, yet it is crucial. A Greek Cypriot woman overwhelmingly won her case against the Turkish state in the European Court of Human Rights. She cannot go to her home, and is thus deprived of enjoying her home. She was offered a huge sum of money, but, a year and a half later, Turkey has not abided by the Court's decision. A nation cannot remain a member of the Council of Europe if it does not observe the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights.

The fourth issue is vital, and it was raised by a British Conservative delegate at the Council of Europe. Western European nations and other countries all over the world are overwhelmed by refugees and asylum seekers from Turkey. How can that be if Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe? It should uphold the human rights that are laid down by that organisation. The fifth issue is the death penalty, which will be meted out to Mr. Ocalan by the Turkish state. Again, that is against the Council of Europe's rules. If the Council of Europe has one achievement, it is speaking out against the death penalty. That is admirable.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting said earlier, Turkey has not adhered to many United Nations resolutions on Cyprus. We may be in a conflicting position, in which Turkey is thrown out of the Council of Europe while simultaneously being accepted as an aspirant member of the European Union. That would be most embarrassing. Those five issues should be raised repeatedly with Turkey before we progress further with relations between the Turkish state and the European Union. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to pass on those comments to the Foreign Office.

8.53 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I want to speak briefly about the procedures that the Government will pursue for considering regional planning for the south-east. Before I do that, I want to make some personal remarks because I do not know how else they can be placed on the public record.

On Sunday 5 December, *The Sunday Telegraph* published an article which made some critical comments about me. The next day, I brought the matter to the attention of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards because it seemed right and proper to do that as soon as possible. The substance of the complaint in the article was that I had failed to register a loan in the Register of Members' Interests.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards considered the matter and concluded that, because the difference between the interest that I had paid and the market rate at the time was not greater than £215, registration of the loan was not required. She also concluded that there was nothing wrong with the donations that were made to my constituency association. However, she ruled that I should have registered my involvement with Asian Business Breakfast, although I had not gained financial benefit from that body. I took her advice immediately and registered my involvement.

I briefly draw the matter to the attention of the House because, given that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards had made a ruling, I expected *The Sunday Telegraph* to make some comment about it in yesterday's edition, not least because it had published the original article under a headline that contained the word "sleaze". I was somewhat surprised, therefore, to see no mention at all of Miss Filkin's adjudication in yesterday's paper. When a colleague of mine approached another paper that had published the story, he was told that had I been found guilty of every offence by Miss Filkin that would have been news, but being exonerated for the main offence was not news. Such is the life we live, but I think that I should put those matters on the record before the House adjourns. Otherwise, I see no way of hon. Members knowing what has happened.

My real concern is the regional planning guidance process, and I say that as a former junior Minister for inner cities and for planning. Ministers cannot be unaware of the genuine concerns that exist throughout the south-east, but we have a problem because the Minister for Housing and Planning, for whom I have enormous respect, is sidelined: through no fault of his own, he is campaign manager for a Labour candidate for the London mayoral election. Early next year, the Government will publish new regional planning guidance for the south-east, for which there is a consultation period, and I suspect that a large number of people from villages and parishes throughout the south-east will want to take part.

I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), asking whether she would consider visiting Oxfordshire during the consultation. My letter—which was courteous, not aggressive—asked her to come and listen to the concerns of local people about over-development in the south-east. To my total surprise, I received the fairly bureaucratic, dismissive response that Ministers had not yet worked out how they would deal with the consultation process. When I was a Minister, I considered it a particular obligation to visit the constituencies of Labour Members whenever they asked me to do so and I spent a great deal of my time, as did my ministerial colleagues in the then Department of the Environment, making such visits to listen to people's concerns. It seemed to be an important part of the democratic process that constituents should not feel that Ministers were not interested in their problems simply because their Member of Parliament was of a different political party.

I say to the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, who will reply to the debate, that there are genuine concerns about the proposal to build 1.1 million new homes in the south-east by 2016. It has been noted that not one Labour Member signed the letter to the Deputy Prime Minister expressing concerns about that, but it must be in the interests of the Labour party and the Government for Ministers to get out and about early next year when the draft regional planning guidance for the south-east is published. I can guarantee that Conservative Members, along with colleagues from other political parties in the various shire counties concerned, will be more than willing to arrange properly organised, sensible meetings

at which local authorities, local people and local amenity groups can reasonably and rationally express their concerns direct to Ministers.

It must be in the interests of democracy for everyone to feel that they have a part to play in the process. Democracy will be damaged and enormous resentment caused if people think that they have not been heard on this important issue, and the Government simply produce a new set of figures at the end of this nominal consultation process on draft regional planning guidance. In the short term, that will be bad electoral news for the Government and the Labour party. Much more significantly, it will undermine confidence in the planning system for years to come. I hope that the Minister will be able to convey to his ministerial colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions that it must be in everyone's interests for them to listen during that crucial consultation period.

8.59 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): One of the advantages of speaking at the end of the debate is that I have had the opportunity to listen to right hon. and hon. Members. I should like to comment on the rural issues raised. I could comment on the views of the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) on nuclear terrorism, because I have read some of the same source material. I could also be taken along the planning route, about which the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) spoke. However, I shall stay with the rural theme that has been explored mainly by Opposition Members. I shall deal with funding issues, and then come back to what the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) said about rural sub-post offices.

It is a canard that the problems with the funding of rural authorities started in May 1997. Those of us with a legacy of involvement in local government and national politics in the rural domain could argue cogently and coherently that these problems have a much longer legacy. I take no pleasure in so saying, but it is important that we put that on the record. I want to draw attention to three problem areas, using examples from my constituency of Stroud and from the county of Gloucestershire. They do not result from immediate policy changes, because their antecedents occurred much further back. The three areas are health, education and policing.

On health, the problem for Gloucestershire is that the formula has been rejigged, which is causing concern among constituents and health professionals. I would argue that the formula should be reconsidered because of the lack of sensitivity in dealing with some of the problems that it is trying to address in difficult and varied circumstances. I would not demur from the view that we should try to deal with the biggest problems in the most deprived areas, which are usually the urban centres because of the number of people who live there. I strongly concur with the Government's approach of prevention rather than cure. We should deal with the worst excesses of health inequality and deprivation, but that should not be done at the cost of the health of others.

In Gloucestershire, we have identified vulnerable areas, particularly to do with older people, and they need to be addressed. Many people want to retire to Gloucestershire, and there may be good reasons for that—I am sure that other hon. Members have similar experiences in their areas. People usually retire when they are fit and healthy, but, in their latter years, their health may deteriorate. Health authorities are sometimes not capable of dealing with the skewed nature of the health problems. That is particularly acute in Gloucestershire, which has a good reputation for dealing with people with special needs and learning difficulties. Some of them are older, and they are cared for by the residential and nursing sector. To be fair, that is accounted for in social services funding. We do not get as much as some of us would like, but we tend not to get equivalent and appropriate funding for health services.

My hon. Friend the Minister may care to comment on that, or pass on my remarks to his colleagues in the Department of Health, who need to be made more aware of the acute problems faced in Gloucestershire. The existing budget has to take much of the pressure, and that is neither fair nor reasonable. I can state categorically that we are pleased with many of the changes that the Government have introduced. The main acute hospital in the west of the county, Gloucestershire Royal hospital, is being refurbished, but much still needs to be done.

Gloucestershire's education has traditionally received low funding. We were part of the E8 group, which has now grown to become the E40. Heads are always approaching me to tell me about Gloucestershire's problems: it does not benefit from an area cost adjustment and, in both the secondary and the primary sectors, it has been relatively underfunded in comparison with other counties. There is a considerable difference—about £1,000—between the funding of Essex schools and that of Gloucestershire schools. That did not arise overnight, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will recognise the problems that it causes and the need to re-evaluate the formula.

A particular problem has been caused by the fact that many schools in my county chose to become grant-maintained, not for any philosophical reason but because more money was involved. Those schools have now returned to local control. There has been no blood-letting or arguments, either between the authority and the schools or, more particularly, between the schools, which says a lot for the professionalism of the teachers—including heads—and, indeed, for the attitudes of parents and children. An anomaly has been thrown up, however. The schools involved now have less money, which means redundancies—redundancies that will have to be shared throughout the LEA sector. That is unfair to schools that have remained under LEA control and also means that there is less money available generally.

As for policing, I do not disagree with the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) or with those of the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), but the sparsity factor is important. I thought that the right hon. and learned Gentleman was a bit negative: I understood that the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), had accepted—certainly in principle—that the arguments were sound and should be reflected in the rejigging of the formula. The problems relate to when we deal with the matter, where the money will come from and who may lose out as a result, but at least we have made the point.

By pure chance, a meeting took place with my local police authority this morning, attended by four Gloucestershire Members. We heard a doom-laden catalogue of the results of the current low increase,

[Mr. David Drew]

but there was also some good news: if we can have the new police officers that the Home Secretary has said we will have, it will make a considerable difference. It will improve security, which is always a bone of contention in Gloucestershire, and may enable us to make progress with the radio project—a project that involves a good deal of capital expenditure in areas such as ours. I know that that is true in every part of the country, but it applies especially to a small rural force.

All those factors prove to me that there is a problem of funding in rural areas. I will not hide from that; I will not say that the Government should brush it under the carpet because it happens not to be convenient for them to talk about it. The reasons for the problem are obvious. They relate to how we measure distance, how we deal with isolation, the lack of economies of scale in our most rural areas, and, indeed, the ever-increasing likelihood that we need a debate on minimum standards. Obviously, in rural areas standards sometimes fall below the norm that is expected in urban areas.

I do not disagree with what was said by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome. There is a real threat, but, as always in the case of threats, there are also opportunities. Last week, when I spoke in the debate on the Post Office, I said, "For heaven's sake, let us realise the opportunities." When I visited ICL last week to view the horizon project, I thought that there was a real chance to put the Post Office at the forefront of the new technology and of any competition, whether it came from within this country or, more particularly, from outside it. What worries me is that I am not sure whether that has been totally understood. I am not criticising Post Office management, and I am certainly not criticising those who are trying to run sub-post offices, but it should be realised that there are enhanced opportunities to extend postal and communication services.

On my Christmas visit to my post office, I heard that mail is up by 15 per cent. That shows what sub-post offices can do. On the back of that, they have to break into the network banking system, rather than view it as a total threat. What better way of turning the position round than to realise that banks which have lost all those branches can regain them again? They cannot do so through their own businesses as they have sold them, but they can use local sub-post offices, particularly those in rural areas. That is what people want and are looking forward to.

I am aware of the time, so I will not speak much about the matter, but the e-government debate is crucial. Sub-post offices could become the centre point of their communities, where people genuinely use the internet, find out information, but, more particularly, change passports, get a driving licence and use local government services in all their different forms. That shows that there is a nexus between commercialisation and the way we liberalise the system and democratising it and making it fully available.

I have tried to show that there is a need for a proper rural debate. That was no more clearly shown than by the publication of the performance and innovation unit report, "Rural Economies." There was a rumour that it was slipped out on a Friday. I hope that that is not true. I have read it quite quickly, so I will not pretend that I am an expert on it, but it contains many good ideas. It is about putting forward a debate as a starting point to the rural White Paper, which will come some time next year.

There are many challenges in rural Britain, as those of us who are interested in the agricultural scene know only too well. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) spoke about one aspect of that. There are many challenges, but agriculture is not the whole rural scene, although it is an important part of it. We can show that we are capable of doing many things in the rural domain.

The planning process needs to be completely reformed, but not by going away from any controls and throwing away the green belt and the greenfield protection that we need. We have to recognise that some flexibility is required in the way in which we use old buildings and bring back communities that no longer have the opportunity to work in agriculture so that they can genuinely find work where they live.

I could make many other comments, but time is against me. I urge the House to start a proper debate on where we want to take our rural economy, rural services and, indeed, democracy in rural areas.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Four hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. If they could confine their remarks to six to seven minutes each, all will be satisfied. Otherwise, I am afraid that all will not. I call Mr. David Amess.

9.13 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): Before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess, I wish to make several points. The first is a happy one. The Palace theatre opened last Wednesday. I am missing tonight's gala performance, but I am delighted to tell the Minister that he will not have to listen to any more complaints from me about that matter.

I congratulate all those who have been responsible for the constructive pressure that has resulted in the theatre reopening. In particular, I am delighted that the chairman of the Eastern Arts Board has supported the theatre and Key Med, the theatregoers club. I congratulate everyone associated with the reopening of the theatre. As I went on Saturday, I can commend to everyone "A Christmas Carol." It was a magnificent performance, better than any West End production.

The rest of my five minutes is not happy at all. I am sick to death of the Government, their photo opportunities, their press releases and their non-delivery of services. For two years, I have worked with all the people who wished to achieve objective 2 status for Southend. I had meetings with the Minister. I went to Europe. A few weeks ago, a letter was delivered to me by the Minister telling me that we had successfully achieved objective 2 status for Southend and, in particular, for Leigh and Chalkwell in Southend, West.

Leigh and Chalkwell have worked on various programmes to uplift those communities—with objective 2 funding, the creek would have been dredged, the jetty would have been enlarged, housing would have been redeveloped and various leisure facilities would have been provided. I am, therefore, sure that hon. Members will

appreciate the astonishment and deep anger I felt when, last week, as I was about to help switch on the Leigh lights, my attention was drawn to an item in the evening edition of the local newspaper, stating that Leigh and Chalkwell were not to benefit from objective 2 status.

The way in which I learned that information was a disgrace. At the very least, a Minister could have written to me about the matter, or contacted me on the telephone. Instead, the Government have treated me with complete contempt, and it sickens me. I have yet to receive a letter on the matter signed by the Prime Minister. Although I know only too well that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department of Trade and Industry are responsible for the matter, I cannot even get a signed letter on it from the leader of the Labour party. I have received one letter on it, but it was from the correspondence secretary, who will pass on the matter to the appropriate Minister.

It is an absolute disgrace that Ministers think that they can adopt a cavalier attitude towards hon. Members. I am sorry, but the way in which they have chosen to handle the matter demonstrates political spite. It is disgraceful to take it out on my constituents.

I have had one letter from a Minister—*[Interruption.]* The Government Whip shakes his head. I have received a letter from a Minister telling me that Leigh and Chalkwell would benefit from objective 2 status, but I have also read the opposite in a newspaper—as Ministers did not show the courtesy of sending me a letter to that effect. It is disgusting, and I blame no one other than the Prime Minister.

All my other remarks are on the same topic. Southend council has 19 Conservative councillors, 12 Liberal Democrat councillors and eight Labour councillors, and the Labour and Liberal Democrat members work together to keep the Conservative party out of power. The Liberal Democrats are constantly wringing their hands publicly, whereas, privately, they hang on to power. Although they make terrible noises, saying, "It's awful that Leigh and Chalkwell are being deprived of objective 2 status", if they were serious about it, they would withdraw from the alliance and give the Conservatives the chance to govern.

The closure of Lulworth Court—a respite centre for disabled people—has been announced, not by the Conservatives but by Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors. Blenheim house—a residential home for elderly people—has been closed. That was the fault not of the Conservatives but entirely of the Labour-Liberal council.

There has been hypocrisy over Hainault avenue, in Westborough—where a Labour activist has been campaigning to get the Liberal Democrats out and trying to hoodwink everyone into believing that, if they vote Labour in the May elections, the situation will change. As everyone knows, there are double yellow lines in Hainault avenue entirely because of the Lib-Lab council. If residents in Westborough want a change, they will have to vote Conservative in the next election.

There has been a scandal with asylum seekers, affecting—although we cannot obtain a firm figure from the local authority—more than 600 people. The treatment of asylum seekers in Southend has been cruel, and it is entirely the fault of the Labour Government. Schools have written to me about unfair funding arrangements for asylum seekers. Southend has more asylum seekers than Thurrock; it has received £17,000, whereas Thurrock has received £150,000.

We have generally had an education fiasco in Southend. Although some hon. Members have said that they have not had many problems with formerly grant-maintained schools, I have had problems with them in Southend—in Westborough, for example, with nursery schools. I have also had complaints about the pupil retention grant and the standards funds.

We have the Labour Government to blame for underfunding of police. We do not have enough police.

Social services in Southend are charging. Day centres for the mentally handicapped are charging, and charges to many handicapped and elderly people have been increased vastly.

Finally we have the fiasco over mobile phone masts. I have problems in Chalkwell lodge, Cottesmore court and Highlands boulevard.

Sadly, apart from the performance of "A Christmas Carol", the scene in Southend, West is not a happy one. I entirely blame the Labour Government and our 12 Liberal councillors and eight Labour councillors.

9.20 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): I had thought that mine might be the first partisan remarks tonight. I had not counted on the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess). I found a great deal to agree with in what he and others have said, but I shall not waste time going over that.

I should like to tell the House a story of two reports that I received in the post in the same week. One was the Worcestershire health authority's health improvement programme. For all I know, it may be a controversial document with some members of the medical community in Worcestershire, but it is admirable in the sense that it is specific and can be pinned down. It has clear, measurable objectives and targets, and anyone can understand what the Worcestershire health authority is seeking to deliver.

In almost the same post, I received the West Midlands regional development agency's strategy document, Advantage West Midlands. I am a long-standing critic of regionalism. I have spoken against the concept in the Chamber on many occasion. I hope that even the staunchest friend of regionalism would admit that this document is awful. It is facile gibberish of the worst possible kind. Apparently, it has been awarded the plain English crystal mark for clarity.

In the chapter on "Developing a diverse and dynamic business base" under the heading "Developing Business Growth Task Groups", we read:

> "There may be opportunities for developing clusters as the networks become established. Its members (including sub-groups) may work on joint projects which have an end product. They would then be considered to be a 'cluster'. . . . A force for converting into a cluster may be the action plans developed by the earlier networks."

I hope that the House followed that clear exposition.

Under the heading "The West Midlands Economic Strategy in context", we read about action plans, which are to evolve from that strategy. The document says:

> "Those working on the framework headings will be asked to advise the four pillar groups as to how the action plan should handle the framework."

[Mr. Peter Luff]

Ah yes, of course. I could not have put it better myself.

I hope that the chairman, Mr. Stephenson, did not write the chairman's introduction. Indeed, I hope that he did not even read it. It is either the worst kind of new Labour platitudes or simply wrong. It says:

"Innovation should be the touchstone for the actions we hope to facilitate to create the West Midlands' advantage."

That is dubious grammar to say the least, but what on earth does it mean? The document rightly cites entrepreneurs of whom the west midlands are proud—Abraham Darby, Josiah Wedgwood and Frank Whittle. They did not rely on Advantage West Midlands. The touchstone of their success was their personal ambition and talent. That is what matters.

The chairman says:

"It is quite radical to attempt to tackle economic, environmental and social objectives at the same time. . . . We have to develop the holistic framework in which policies can be effectively 'joined up' to meet local needs."

He is condemned out of his own mouth. It is not radical anyway. Governments have always sought to tackle economic, environmental and social objectives at the same time. The Conservative Government tried to do that and, to be fair, the Labour Government are trying to do the same, but are not doing it particularly well in my judgment.

I had not intended to read the document, but I settled down to it on the train and found that it was better value than *Private Eye*. The tragedy is that it is supposed to be a serious economic strategy for the west midlands, but it is not. It sets out a series of spurious aims, which duplicate the work of Government Departments. There is only one that I agree with—the sixth aim

"to provide sites and premises of the right size and quality, and in the right place."

That was previously addressed by English Partnerships, led by Lord Walker of Worcester, my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Worcester. The advantage of English Partnerships was that it had one office, one chairman and one chief executive. Now we have seven regional development agencies, with seven chairmen, seven chief executives and seven bureaucracies. That is a hopeless over-provision of bureaucrats with much less work done on the ground.

The seventh aim is extraordinary. It is

"to encourage people to take part in economic and community life."

The document goes on:

"Regeneration programmes will deal with the need for childcare facilities, infrastructure, transport and premises. . . . There will also be measures to tackle the problems of crime and ill health, as well as initiatives to improve health and housing conditions."

The detailed exposition adds culture and sport as well.

The document comes not from the government of the west midlands—although the Government would like it to be so in due course—but from a regional development agency. How can it cope with all that? To use a seasonal metaphor, this is a Christmas tree of a document on which every bauble of interest to every passing local councillor has been hung in the most shameless way.

A longer speech would enable me to dissect this document in more detail, and I should have liked to do so. However, let me pick out a couple of other solecisms from the report.

"It is the blend of cultures, unique histories and shared futures that defines the West Midlands."

What about London, or the east midlands or Yorkshire? What makes that distinctive of the west midlands?

"West Midlands economic development partners are working together to build the regions role as a region of Europe".

We know what that agenda means—the Balkanisation of England and the sidelining of this House.

Where is the reference to cross-border co-operation? It is here. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) sitting on the Front Bench. We have many mutual, cross-border interests with Gloucestershire—but, of course Gloucestershire is in the south-west region, along with the Isles of Scilly. There is passing reference to co-operation with other regions, but it relates only to tourism. My hon. Friend and I sometimes fight, but we sometimes agree, and we know that many other more important issues than tourism unite and sometimes divide our two counties, which actually should be in the same region, not in different ones.

I could go on, but I shall conclude with a quote from this totally inadequate and woeful document, which the Deputy Prime Minister should send back to the West Midlands regional development agency saying that he cannot understand it.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): He probably wrote it.

Mr. Luff: It certainly reads as if he might have written it.

The document says:

"Regeneration activity works best when the focus comes from within the community, with local people dealing with local problems. Local communities will be best at recognising their own individual needs."

That paragraph should be the obituary for the whole wretched concept of regional development agencies.

9.26 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I wish to refer to a constituency case, which has implications for the whole Kingdom. It concerns the winter fuel grant to pensioners of £100. One of my constituents is a carer who is looking after her mother, who will be 95 next month. She received notification that she would receive £50 because there were two pensioners in the one household. She then discovered that there was no £50 for her mother. When she inquired, she was told that the dateline for allocation was September, during which time the care manager had arranged respite care in a residential home to allow my constituent and her husband to have a break. As the mother—who receives care and attention at home—was in a respite home for three weeks starting in September, when the weather is fairly decent, she was not permitted to have her £50 winter fuel allowance.

It so happens that, on appeal, my constituent will get the money. However, she asked me to raise the matter of the interpretation of the law. When she went to the citizens advice bureau for guidance, she was told that

there had been a mistake. The CAB got in touch with the office at Newcastle, to be told that the law was being administered correctly. I ask the Minister to make sure that no other citizens are deprived of their genuine entitlement because they are in respite care during the application period.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) referred to the millennium, and we heard from the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) that he has had difficulty with *The Sunday Telegraph*. We realise that those in the media and broadcasting have their own forms of censorship. I wish to put on record our congratulations to Sir Cliff Richard, who—despite the attention of those who, because of jealousy or other philosophical or irreligious reasons, were not prepared to allow him to have the best lyric of all, the Lord's prayer, set to a well-known tune in the tradition of Luther, Wesley and Booth—demonstrated that the devil does not get the best tunes. He has topped the pops and we congratulate him on celebrating the millennium and the year of our Lord, 2000.

9.30 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The House knows that overwhelmingly the most important issue in my constituency is the proposed closure of the Royal Hospital Haslar. In 1994, the previous Government decided, after careful consideration, that Haslar should be the tri-service hospital. Since then, matters have gone well, so we in the Gosport area were devastated a year and three days ago when we heard, in December 1998, that the present Government intended to change the structure of defence medical services.

There were three elements in that decision. First, the Government intended to place more emphasis on Ministry of Defence hospital units. Secondly, they intended to open a centre of defence medicine in Birmingham; that announcement was made today. Thirdly, they intended to close Haslar.

After several discussions with defence medical services staff, I am convinced that, although the MOD hospital units may have some merit in medical terms, they are a disaster in terms of the retention of the military ethos and morale. As for the centre of defence medicine, I cannot believe that its location in Birmingham will attract people and make them want to study and practise medicine as part of the Army, Navy or Air Force to the same extent that a location in the south would. Haslar is fairly adjacent to a wide range of naval facilities, for example, and the Army facilities at Aldershot, Salisbury plain and Warminster are nearby, as are the Royal Air Force bases at Brize Norton and Lyneham.

I am therefore convinced that Haslar would be a better location for the defence medicine centre, and that Ministry of Defence medical services will lose personnel as a result of placing the centre in Birmingham. I plead with the Government even now to reconsider the matter. Defence medical services are crumbling, and we are losing doctors and nurses at an increasing rate. I have described to the House before the difficulties experienced by orthopaedic surgeons at Haslar. There should be eight such surgeons in the establishment there; the hospital in fact has six, and five have resigned.

From a military point of view, there is everything to be said for retaining Haslar. The development of the Birmingham centre would make matters worse, as it will take doctors and nurses away from Gosport. Moreover, people who moved to Gosport in the past five years will not be prepared to move again to Birmingham.

There are also persuasive civilian arguments for the retention of the hospital at Haslar. The Portsmouth and South East Hampshire health authority and the Portsmouth hospitals trust realise that the retention of at least part of the Haslar facility is crucial for the provision of civilian medical care in Gosport and the rest of south Hampshire. The authority already has a waiting list of more than 15 months for all operations, and the waiting time at the accident and emergency unit at the Queen Alexandra hospital at Cosham is a completely unacceptable five hours. Haslar already provides significant resources to assist the hospital trust and health authority to provide medical care for people in south Hampshire.

It is extremely important that the Haslar facilities, on which £35 million has been spent in the past 10 years, should not be closed. About 10 days ago, I wrote to the Prime Minister with the following plea. I asked that he or an appropriate Minister intervene to make the Ministry of Defence and the national health service display a co-operation that has not been greatly evident so far and ensure that medical facilities at Haslar can remain available to the local civilian community in the longer term.

The Ministry of Defence has made available several redundant military sites in my constituency, among them the HMS Daedalus site at Lee-on-the-Solent. What happens is that, years after closure, the MOD remains the owner while the local community waits for a developer to emerge who will acquire the site. When that finally happens, the developer then sells part of the site off to an authority or institution.

That would not be acceptable in the case of Haslar which, as I said, has had £35 million spent predominantly on the centre or cross block which contains the operating theatres. That would ideally suit the national health service as a facility to supplement those in the rest of south Hampshire and specifically to provide out-patient or other care in the Gosport peninsula.

My plea today is for the Government to practise what they are proud to call joined-up government. The Ministry of Defence must not be allowed to walk away from Haslar without providing facilities for civilians in the Gosport area. I plead that this be done urgently so that we can plan ahead for health care in the area.

9.36 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): We have had an extremely good debate in the past two hours. I congratulate all those who have taken part on responding to pleas from the Chair and, in some cases, cutting down their remarks. That has meant that for the first time since I have been replying to this debate, since July 1997, everyone who has wanted to speak has spoken. That, in the last of these debates to take place in the 1900s, is very appropriate.

I think that there is a real affection throughout the House for this debate. I am delighted that when the Modernisation Committee made its recommendations for Westminster Hall, it specifically excepted this debate and said that it should continue to take place on the Floor of the House. Whatever the future of what I like to call the

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

"Grand Parliamentary Committee" in Westminster Hall, I hope that this debate will always remain on the Floor of the House.

Hon. Members can use this debate to air grievances and hold the Government to account—the two prime responsibilities of any hon. Member. We have ranged tonight from the individual to the international. The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) who, sadly, is no longer in his place, quite rightly decided to use this opportunity to highlight the case of a constituent who he believes is being victimised. I can make no comment on that, but it was an entirely proper use of the hon. Gentleman's time. Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) used part of his speech to raise the case of a constituent baffled by regulation, and sought clarification for her. Although the Minister will not necessarily be able to provide that in his reply, I am sure that he will ensure that it is done, so far as it lies within his power.

Then there was the great international issue of Cyprus, raised at the beginning of the debate by one of the most familiar participants in these Adjournment debates, the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox). He has used this opportunity before, and he rightly used it again. I hope that, in due course, his remarks will be drawn to the attention of the Foreign Secretary and that he will receive a detailed and satisfactory reply. There is no more potentially explosive situation in our continent than that of Cyprus. We would all like to see true peace and justice return to that island.

The hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) also used the opportunity, in an admirably brief four-minute speech, to raise that subject and also the position of Turkey, which many of us are glad to see accepted as a proper aspirant for membership of the European Union. Nevertheless, there are problems to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) went nuclear in a very literal sense. He talked about the dangers of nuclear terrorism, giving a chilling account of the consequences of the disintegration of a great super-power. Again, he brought to the attention of the House matters which we would all do right to ponder.

Then we had what I would call the classic speech. For seven minutes, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) talked about a local issue. I have some knowledge of the Royal hospital in Wolverhampton because it served many of my constituents for many years. She rightly indicated that the hospital was endowed and supported, as it had been created, by local people. She made a plea that the accountants' formula should not be forced into play to deprive local people of a new amenity on the site of a service that has served them so well for so long.

We heard next the bravura performance of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who was sadly deprived of an opportunity to speak in the last of these debates. He brought us the glad tidings that the Palace theatre is no longer dark, and urged us all to go to see "A Christmas Carol" there. Indeed, he said that he was missing the gala performance tonight, but I should think that it is him who is being missed as he would have been the star turn. Instead, he used his not inconsiderable vituperative talents to berate the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) did likewise, although he did not aim his remarks directly at the Government. He used the rapier of wit to puncture the balloon of bureaucracy. I am afraid that I did not read the dreadful document to which he referred. All of us were sent it, but I had a brief look, saw some of the perversions of the English language that so disfigured it and tossed it into the relevant filing cabinet, which was on the floor. I now rather regret having done so, as the document would doubtless have enlivened many an occasion on which I have been bored. My hon. Friend was right to draw attention to the utter pretentiousness of that sort of verbiage.

One thing that has shone through the debate is the concern on both sides of the House about rural communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) talked about the police. Anyone who sits for a rural constituency, as I do, knows that the situation described by my hon. Friend is by no means unique. We all see real pressure on the police in rural areas. My hon. Friend's concern was adequately and properly expressed, and he made some positive suggestions that I hope the Home Secretary will take to heart.

My hon. Friend was echoed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North Hykeham and Stroud—

Mr. Drew: Stroud?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am sorry. By Jove, what a wonderful constituency that would be. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), which is in my native county of Lincolnshire, talked eloquently about the police, but also about the problems faced by two of his constituents, whose anonymity he rightly preserved, and who were deprived of a life-enhancing drug, beta interferon. My right hon. and learned Friend deserves a full answer to his questions.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) also talked about the police. The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst)—now a regular in these debates—talked about the plight of the small slaughterhouse, highlighting the iniquity of the double inspection and the enormous economic burden that it places on vital local services. The hon. Gentleman rightly indicated the real problems caused, not least to animals, by the closure of small slaughterhouses.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) talked about rural sub-post offices. He spoke most eloquently, and I could have thought that he was describing my own rural sub-post office in the village of Enville. It is a centre of community life, and it has been run by the Smith family for three generations. The latest generation took it over just over a year ago. The family provides a valuable social service as well as an excellent post office. All over the country, people such as the Smiths serve rural communities, but their future is in jeopardy. The hon. Gentleman performed a real service to them all by using their situation for his speech.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about what is being done in many villages to celebrate the millennium—God willing, I shall be in Enville on new year's eve—where

there shall be proper celebrations, often accompanied by church services to mark not the end of the 20th century, which will not come for another year, but the passage of the 1900s. I was pleased, too, to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South highlight the significance of the millennium, and he paid a much-deserved tribute to Sir Cliff Richard, who has been vilely castigated in recent days.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) made a brief personal statement about the way in which he had been maligned by a newspaper that many of us hold in high repute. He was right to do that. Members on both sides of the House nodded in sympathy as he described what must have been a pretty rotten ordeal. He has the sympathy of all Members of the House. He also talked about the planning system. Confidence in that system is essential for a true balance in our rural and urban communities. He correctly pointed out that that confidence was at risk.

The hon. Member for Stroud, who echoed the concerns of other hon. Members about the police and sub-post offices, also talked about education and health. I find fellow feeling with him. Members representing Staffordshire constituencies believe that the county has been badly affected by the application of the funding formula. The hon. Gentleman was right to refer to the problems of health funding in areas to which people retire. When people retire, they are at the peak of fitness, but they spend their retirement years, which are also their declining years, in areas that are not necessarily funded to cope with that. He was right to highlight that point.

We ended on another health note with the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers). He must deserve an accolade as one of the most conscientiously consistent of campaigning Members in the House. He has fought for his hospital with great courtesy, but complete tenacity. I wish him well and hope that the Government will respond.

I now conclude my remarks because I promised that, as we had a few minutes extra for the winding-up speeches, I would, in true Christmas spirit, share them with the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office. The debate has been extremely worth while. I wish you, Madam Speaker, all Members in the Chamber and all those who serve us in the House—all members of the staff—a very happy, joyful, tranquil Christmas and a peaceful and, if possible, a prosperous new year.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): This has been a wide-ranging, interesting and informative debate. I am delighted that 15 Back-Bench Members have had the opportunity to pursue issues relating to individual constituents and to constituency matters. That is the purpose of such debates. However, we have also heard about wider issues—foreign affairs and the need to examine nuclear plant and nuclear weapon decommissioning in the former Soviet Union, especially in Russia. Several hon. Members have made important speeches—others supported them—on the countryside, health and the police. I have been asked to pass several messages to my ministerial colleagues. I have got the messages—I will ensure that they are passed on and that everyone who has spoken in the debate receives a reply.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox)—a veteran of these occasions—was first off the grid. He was well supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis). They rightly told us of the challenges and opportunities in the long campaign to resolve the problems in Cyprus. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting told us of the slow and difficult discussions that were beginning in New York. The discussions that took place in Helsinki at the weekend, on which the Prime Minister reported to the House today, showed that, after 25 years of struggle, there are possibilities for progress, if there is good will on both sides.

Several hon. Members, led by the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), made important speeches on the need for resources for the police. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman in two respects. First, he acknowledged that police forces throughout the country had received extra money. Secondly, he spelt out a range of possibilities, which I shall draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, to increase recruitment and improve retention. The hon. Gentleman spoke about difficulties in his constituency where, as I understood it, police officers were being moved from one part of the area to another.

One of the important initiatives that the Government have taken is to ensure that, each year, district commanders lay down a local policing plan, which is consulted upon. I believe that there will be increasing opportunities for people to have a say in how the police are used in their area. It is also important to get best value from the police. We look at failure in the public services too much and do not reward success enough. There is much to do on that.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) spoke about problems with the Lincolnshire police. I would simply say to him that the Lincolnshire police have a lot to do. They have a new chief constable. I believe that they have put a difficult period behind them. I am with the right hon. and learned Gentleman in wanting to do better for people who live in Lincolnshire.

It seems to me that there is a need to review how we allocate resources to the police force. Several hon. Members spoke about a new study that has been undertaken at the Government's behest. I cannot promise immediate action on it, but I remind colleagues that the Government gave a commitment that they would consider the formula for allocation not just to the police, but across local authorities, in a three-year review. We have just announced the results of the second year review, and there is much to be argued about.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham also spoke about the problems facing sufferers of MS. I know Professor B, whom he spoke about—a leading international expert on the matter—and I know his views and have some sympathy with them. That is why the Government have set up the National Institute for Clinical Effectiveness. The issue of MS and beta interferon is one of the first subject areas to be considered. Announcements will be made about that in the spring and summer. However, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that it is wrong that people in different parts of the country have different access to different services. I hope that NICE will enable us to move forward and meet his constituents' real needs, as he outlined in such a moving way.

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) also spoke about a health issue in a sense—a derelict health issue. Her arguments about local consultation on planning are extremely important. It must be right to change blighted properties—blighted areas. What she described as a village in the community is the right way forward. That chimes with the Government's thinking through Lord Rogers's task force. I will of course ensure that she receives an early reply to her letter.

The hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) has pursued the issue of Haslar hospital with vigour, in a robust campaign. He knows that careful thought has been given to that decision, and that it has been taken reluctantly. He knows of the volume of work and the patient mix at Haslar hospital, and he knows that the facility at Haslar will not close until new arrangements are in place at the Queen Alexandra hospital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), who could not be with us for these winding-up speeches, spoke strongly for his constituent, Andrea Morgan. I do not want to prejudge the issue, but it seems to me that local authorities and all employers should treat such issues with sense and sensitivity. I felt that that might not have happened in this case. I remind the London borough of Hillingdon that it is subject to employment law and I undertake that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions will consider the case closely to see whether we can reach a proper outcome.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) spoke strongly on the important matter of the need for a post office network across the country and, especially, in rural areas. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) referred to opportunities as well as challenges and I think that the horizon scheme offers opportunities. The move to e-commerce and to new technology will also offer opportunities, but there is a real threat to post offices and we should not deny that. I offer the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome the undertaking that having a network of post offices across the country is a Government priority. We have asked the performance and innovation unit to consider closely how we can secure the future of sub-post offices. There are imaginative ways forward, but we have talked about how pubs and schools in rural areas have closed. Therefore, there is much more to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) also discussed countryside issues. He pressed the case for the road in his constituency and I shall ensure that the Highways Agency and the relevant Minister are made aware of the points that he made. He also spoke strongly in support of small abattoirs and about the need for them on animal welfare grounds. He stressed the need to maintain the industry in rural areas, and the Government have done a fair amount to help small abattoirs. There has been a review of red tape and regulation, we have deferred the Meat Hygiene Service charges on specified risk materials and, importantly, we have fixed charges in abattoirs for next year at this year's prices—that will save the industry £7 million.

Housing in the countryside raises other issues. The Crow report is before Ministers and the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) spoke properly and wisely about the need to consult people and to take communities with us. I shall ensure that his views on the need to visit are considered. I also acknowledge the personal statement that he made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud talked about a range of countryside issues and about the need for extra resources, particularly in his area. I remind him and other Members that the latest local government settlement is the best one since the council tax began. However, there is much more to be done.

The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) spoke about a millennium boom and the problems of nuclear plants and weapons in Russia. He made good points and I was particularly struck by the need for scientists in the former Soviet Union, the United States and western Europe to work together so that they are not isolated.

I inform the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) that I have had my spies at the Palace theatre and I know that "A Christmas Carol" is worth seeing. I also know that the announcement on objective 2 funding that will come soon will be worth waiting for. I cannot promise the House a decision before Christmas, but it will not be long coming.

There was pantomime season from the hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff)—a giant killer if ever I saw one. I also endorse the points that the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) made about Cliff Richard and his millennium message.

We go into a new millennium and a future that I hope will be better for our families, our children and our communities. I wish you, Madam Speaker, the staff of the House and all my colleagues a merry Christmas. In particular, I tell my friends in the Whips Office that both sides of the House look forward to a peaceful new year. I hope that they, in the spirit of Christmas, will grant us that.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day, and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills) shall apply.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any messages from the Lords shall have been received.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

COMMITTEES

Madam Speaker: For the convenience of the House, I propose that we take motions 8, 9, 10 and 11 together.

Ordered,

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

That Caroline Flint and Mr. Bill Rammell be discharged from the Education and Employment Committee and Helen Jones and Mr. Stephen Twigg be added to the Committee.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

That Mr. Graham Stringer be discharged from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee and Dr. Stephen Ladyman be added to the Committee.

HEALTH COMMITTEE

That Mr. Ivan Lewis be discharged from the Health Committee and Mr. Stephen Hesford be added to the Committee.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

That Mr. Martin Salter be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Dr. Nick Palmer be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

PETITION

Exodus Collective

10 pm

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): The background to the petition is the anti-social activities of an organisation known as the Exodus collective, which some two years ago squatted illegally at Long Meadow farm. Since then, it has caused considerable misery to my constituents, by running illegal raves and having no consideration for my constituents, some of whom have not been able to get out of their homes while the raves have been going on and some of whom have been denied access to their homes. Those homes have been made filthy by the activities of those who have gone to the raves, and Exodus has acted in a thoroughly anti-social and unneighbourly fashion.

The organisation tried to buy Long Meadow farm. It gave promises that it never kept and strung out the process to such a degree that, in the end, a Minister wrote to me saying that it was no longer realistic to sell the farm to Exodus, and it would therefore be re-advertised. Nine days later, the Minister reversed that decision.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Mid-Bedfordshire declares that there is great concern over the sale of Long Meadow farm in Chalton, Bedfordshire to the collective Exodus and over the continued harassment which has been suffered by the residents of Mid-Bedfordshire as a result of the activities of the Exodus collective, which has been squatting on Long Meadow farm for two years. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions decided on 25th October 1999 that the collective had failed after 18 months to pay a deposit and exchange contracts on Long Meadow farm and that the collective would be evicted from the land on 3rd November 1999, an eviction which has not been carried out despite the Highways Agency conclusion that the prospect of sale to the collective was no longer realistic.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to adhere to the decision to evict the Exodus collective from Long Meadow farm, and to cancel the contract to sell the property and instead to sell the property to those who will act in a responsible and neighbourly manner.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Arthritis

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

10.3 pm

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to raise the issue of arthritis. The subject is of keen interest to me, as hon. Members will realise when I say that today is my 30th wedding anniversary, and I am here rather than out with my husband. Some would say that it is a case of familiarity breeding contempt, but I prefer to think that it is one of absence making the heart grow fonder.

As you know, Madam Speaker, Members of Parliament are invited to many events and asked to support many causes. Sometimes one of those events sparks a particular interest, and that is how I became involved with pain management and arthritis. Two years ago, I attended an exhibition put on by the Havering branch of Backcare, which is run by Peter Moore. He has developed an holistic approach to the self-management of back pain. Too often in the past and, unfortunately, still today, people with back pain are told that nothing can be done. They are given painkillers and sent home.

Peter Moore's programme of self-help, "Fighting Back", is based on appropriate exercise, relaxation and techniques for lifting and moving things. The results from those attending the programme show less use of drugs, more confidence and better mobility—in effect, a much improved quality of life. If the Minister wishes to know more about that programme, I should be only too happy to provide more information.

Backcare is a member of the British League Against Rheumatism—BLAR. BLAR is an umbrella organisation for 23 groups including Arthritis Care—which has produced an excellent document, "Arthritis: getting it right"—the Lady Hoare Trust for Physically Disabled Children, the British Society for Rheumatology, Lupus UK and many more.

In this debate, I am using the term "arthritis", although there are of course many different types of arthritis. I hope that the groups concerned and those suffering from arthritis will forgive me for using just the generic term.

I became interested in BLAR's work on musculoskeletal conditions and its self-management course, "Challenging Arthritis", which has similar aims to "Fighting Back". Last week, I hosted an exhibition for BLAR and a reception at the Palace of Westminster, which was very well attended and well received. I heard sufferers from various age groups give moving testimonies of the problems associated with the condition. I thank BLAR for the information and help that it has given me, and especially thank Sophie Edwards, its chief executive.

Musculoskeletal conditions are the biggest cause of physical disability in the United Kingdom. More than 8 million people suffer from arthritis in the UK, and if we include back pain, the figure rises to 11 million. There are some 11,000 sufferers in my constituency and approximately 1,300 of them are under 45 years of age. An estimated 70 Members of Parliament have arthritis. I remember Jo Richardson, who challenged arthritis and battled against pain. She was a role model for many of us. I think also of my assistant Vanessa, who has arthritis of the hip.

Given the statistics, we must all know someone with the condition, yet we constantly underestimate the numbers affected. In a recent survey among Members of Parliament, 90 per cent. of those polled underestimated the total number of people in the UK who have arthritis; 50 per cent. put the number at 3 million or fewer, yet, as I have said, the true figure is 8 million.

The conditions have a massive effect on the individual, the national health service and the country. The cost to the NHS is estimated to be £600 million a year, involving more than 4 million general practitioner consultations each year. That number is set to rise. There were 10,000 knee replacements in 1989. Between 1985 and 1990—the years for which we have the most recent figures—the national rate almost doubled in patients aged between 65 and 84.

The cost to the individual is great. The major symptom of arthritis is pain. Indeed, 37 per cent. of people with arthritis are in pain all the time, and 60 per cent. have their sleep regularly disturbed. There is no cure, although joint replacement helps, and we still do not know the cause of many forms of arthritis.

For people in constant pain, the impact on established relationships can be dramatic. A spontaneous hug can cause excruciating pain, resulting in tension in the relationship. For people in work, arthritis can mean the abrupt end of a successful career: 50 per cent. of all people with rheumatism and arthritis are forced to stop working within five years of diagnosis—some because employers will not adapt the working environment to allow them to continue.

Arthritis does not only affect elderly people. Of the 8 million people whom I mentioned earlier, 1.2 million are under the age of 45 and more than 14,500 are children. For young people, there can be problems at school. The student may look no different from any other, but will need care, may need medication during the day and may have mobility problems. Teachers need to be aware of how to deal with the condition. Adaptation of school buildings is often suggested and, if not done, can result in a student's inability to take part in the full range of school activities.

A young man at the reception spoke of access problems. His choice of exam subjects had been restricted, and he felt that his life chances had been badly affected. Young patients may have time off school because of hospitalisation, and there must be better support for tuition in hospitals. Fellow students need to understand the condition and its impact on those affected.

If we as a Government are keen to promote social inclusion, the effects of arthritis must be considered, from access to buildings and services to access to goods—people with arthritic hands find it difficult, if not impossible, to cope with modern packaging.

Unlike sufferers from other chronic conditions, arthritis patients bear their own prescription charges. A recent study shows that the cost to the individual for drugs and adaptations or special equipment averages £4,000 a year. For many people, that is a considerable burden.

Although arthritis cannot be cured—as I mentioned, joint replacement helps in many cases—there is effective pain relief, and new drugs are being developed. Groups such as BLAR welcome initiatives such as the establishment of NICE—the National Institute for Clinical Excellence—and the Commission for Health Improvement, but they are

concerned that those should not become a barrier to access to treatment or a device for rationing. I would welcome my hon. Friend the Minister's assurance on that matter.

There is a need for further training for general practitioners and for consultant expansion, if the Royal College of Physician's target of one rheumatologist per 85,000 population is to be met. Currently in the UK, there are 420 consultants working in rheumatology in 242 rheumatology departments, so there is a long way to go. The best provided region is North Thames, with one rheumatologist per 154,384 population. I hope that my hon. Friend will look into expansion in this specialty.

I mentioned the self-management programmes, "Challenging Arthritis" and "Fighting Back". I hope that my hon. Friend will endorse those initiatives and, if possible, make money available to set up and broaden the availability of self-management courses. Those could form a central part of the expert patients programme. Self-management of pain empowers people to be more independent. It helps to reduce pain and the anxiety and depression that often accompany constant pain.

Those courses are run by volunteers, but arrangements may be made for health and social services professionals to visit the local course—indeed, many already refer patients to them. The courses do not offer medical advice and are not intended as a substitute for medical treatment. They are complementary, but their effect not only benefits the patient, but can have long-term advantages for the health and benefits budget by helping people to return to work and gain independence.

I ask my hon. Friend to encourage health authorities to take up and fund such courses so that they become available to all arthritis sufferers. I urge fellow Members of Parliament to ask their health authorities what services they provide for people with arthritis. Can my hon. Friend give me an assurance that the national service framework on older people will address the needs of older people with arthritis and other conditions, such as Paget's disease, osteoporosis and osteoarthritis? Many older people feel that they do not receive the best treatment because of their age. The National Association for the Relief of Paget's Disease can provide my hon. Friend with many examples of such ageism. It would be good to have a national service framework for arthritis.

I should welcome a special meeting between my hon. Friend and representatives of BLAR to discuss all these issues. Such a meeting would be appropriate, as the decade of bone and joint begins in 2000. That initiative has been endorsed by the United Nations and the Government.

Arthritis Care is running a roadshow next year from March to November, which will be travelling throughout the United Kingdom. The roadshow will provide information, advice and support to people with arthritis. It will also give information to the public. It will have 43 stops on its route and it hopes to reach 100,000 people. I hope that time will be found to visit Romford.

I thank the Minister for his attention during the debate and his consideration of the matters that I have raised. I am asking for more awareness, social inclusion, better access to school, work and health care and for the needs of 8 million people to be taken into account in future health planning.

10.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Mrs. Gordon) on raising this important issue and on her thoughtful and well-informed comments. She has often shown a keen interest in health issues in the past, and the management of arthritis, as she has said, is an important aspect of health care.

Arthritis means inflammation of the joints and it is the principal cause of physical disability in the United Kingdom. The term "arthritis" encompasses more than 100 diseases affecting joints, the surrounding tissues and other connective tissues. These diseases and conditions include osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, which was a particular concern of my hon. Friend, and fibromyalgia.

Arthritis has a significant impact on health and community services, on those who experience its painful symptoms and resulting disability, and on their family members and carers. Its main symptoms are pain and loss of mobility, but the extent and severity of the condition vary from one individual to another.

Arthritis can, and does, affect people of all ages, as my hon. Friend has made clear, from young children to older people, but prevalence generally increases substantially with age. For example, it is estimated that about 70 per cent. of 70-year-olds suffer from some form of arthritis, mostly osteoarthritis. The leading charity in this area, Arthritis Care, believes that between 8 million and 10 million people in the UK suffer from some form of arthritis. This includes about 1 million adults under the age of 45 and about 15,000 children.

The pain and disability accompanying arthritis can be minimised through early diagnosis and appropriate management. These management tools include physical activity, self-management, physical and occupational therapy and joint replacement surgery. There are several ways in which arthritis can affect individuals. As my hon. Friend has said, the main impact is clearly physical. Arthritis sufferers endure pain, loss of joint motion and fatigue. As a result of these symptoms, people with arthritis are significantly less physically active than the rest of the adult population, even after taking their disability into account. Such a lack of activity puts them at greater risk of other diseases, including premature death, heart disease, diabetes and higher blood pressure.

Arthritis can make people more prone to stress, depression, anger and anxiety, and they may experience difficulty coping with pain and disability. That can lead to a feeling of helplessness, lack of self-control and changes in self-esteem and image. People with arthritis frequently experience decreased community involvement and can have problems finding suitable employment. These were both issues to which my hon. Friend was right to draw attention.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a family of related diseases, not a single entity. The problems are primarily a consequence of persistent inflammation of the joints. While any joint can be affected, it is usually in the small peripheral joints, such as the fingers or wrist, that the condition is first noticed. Rheumatoid arthritis currently affects about 5 per cent. of women and 2 per cent. of men in Britain. Sadly, the causes of RA are still unknown.

Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis includes the use of non-drug treatment such as rest and physiotherapy, but drugs may also be required both to control symptoms and

[Mr. John Hutton]

to slow down the progression of the disease. That is important because the longer the disease persists, the more the joints will become damaged.

The arthritis self-management programme is a promising development in the field of arthritis care and treatment—I know that my hon. Friend is especially interested in that aspect of arthritis management. Arthritis Care has developed a self-management programme for people with arthritis that is based on work undertaken in the United States. That has demonstrated major benefits to people with arthritis in America and has reduced the use of health services.

Encouraged by those developments, the Department of Health provided funds for Arthritis Care from 1996-97 to 1998-99 to help develop and pilot a self-management programme for people with arthritis in England. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), when she was a Health Minister, launched the initiative in November 1997.

The arthritis self-management programme is a major project and has several components. It involves the development and provision of self-management courses around the country for people with arthritis. It is a user-led programme, in which all the course leaders are people with arthritis. The programme is delivered by volunteers, is community based and is concerned with empowerment and the development of self-effectiveness. The Department funded the evaluation of this programme, which has demonstrated improved pain management, reduced depression and also resulted in less drug dependency among those participating in the courses.

The Long-term Medical Conditions Alliance also uses the model to ascertain whether people with other conditions find it helpful in managing their illnesses. The Department is providing the LMCA with funding of almost £100,000 over a three-year period to 2001. The aim is to increase knowledge about self-management programmes and the availability of information about living a healthy life with chronic conditions. My hon. Friend expressed anxiety that the Government were not doing enough about such issues. I hope that she is reassured that we take them seriously and that we are trying to respond to them.

In the White Paper "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation", the Government announced their intention to set up an expert patients task force, led by the chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson. Its task is to develop a programme to help people with chronic conditions to maintain their health and improve their quality of life by supporting them to take an "expert" role in managing their conditions.

Arthritis Care's self-management programme was used as an example of good practice in the White Paper. The programme, which is equally applicable to people with other chronic conditions, helps participants to develop a range of skills to deal with their conditions. The pioneering, patient-led project will inform the work of the task force and the approach is likely to form an important component of the final programme. Another vital part of the task force's work will be to link self-management programmes, developed in the voluntary sector, with mainstream NHS and social care services. My hon. Friend gave an example of such a development programme and I should be happy for her to explain her interest in that scheme in more detail at some other time.

The Government also support medical and clinical research into several conditions, including arthritis. The main agency through which the Government support research is the Medical Research Council. The council is an independent body which receives its grant in aid from the Office of Science and Technology, which is part of the Department of Trade and Industry. The most recent figures, for the year 1998-99, show that the council spent nearly £1.3 million on research into osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and rheumatism. That included £160,000 on projects involving juvenile arthritis.

The Department of Health's policy research programme funded a study entitled "Primary Care Interventions in Osteoarthritis". It was a four-year study undertaken by the university of Nottingham, and designed to determine whether exercise could lessen the burden of knee pain in the general population. The report of the study's findings is now at the final draft stage.

Several other studies into arthritis are currently under way, including one in Oxford to investigate key design features of the current hip replacement. Another major investigation at Stoke-on-Trent into the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis aims to identify whether the disease should be treated aggressively, with the aim of suppressing the inflammatory response, or symptomatically, with the aim of minimising functional loss and pain. All patients in the study will be over 18 and will have been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis that has had a duration of between five and 20 years. The study is on-going and will cost around £600,000.

My hon. Friend also referred to the availability of drugs to treat arthritis. She will be aware that many different classes of drugs are used to treat patients who suffer from the condition. They include, for example, analgesics to control pain and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. The latter decrease the body's inflammatory response to disease or injury, but have little or no effect on the underlying disease and therefore cannot prevent the progression of joint destruction or organ damage. There are also a number of side effects associated with most drugs currently used to treat arthritis.

Cox-2 inhibitors, which are a new class of pharmaceuticals, are being developed. They promise similar benefits to other similar drugs, but with a much lower risk of causing ulcers. There is likely to be uncertainty over the appropriate use of these products, especially in relation to simple over-the-counter alternatives such as paracetamol. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence has been asked to review the evidence on Cox-2 inhibitors, make recommendations that will forestall any possible variations in uptake and help to ensure that patients are appropriately targeted. It is expected to report in January 2001.

There is, of course, always hope that new technologies will be developed that can alleviate pain and disability for arthritis sufferers. We have, for example, asked NICE to assess the possible benefits of a new treatment in which damaged hip or knee cartilage is taken out, repaired in the laboratory and replaced in the patient's body. We need to know whether the procedure is cost-effective and whether,

over time, it could lead to a reduction in the prevalence of debilitating osteoarthritis. Such a scientific breakthrough could have a major impact in the future. Today, however, patients may be offered interventions ranging from heat treatment to major surgery. Keyhole surgery techniques, through the use of arthroscopes, are commonplace in orthopaedic departments for assessing osteoarthritis of the knee or removing damaged cartilage, and 100,000 such procedures are carried out annually in NHS hospitals. However, for many, mainly older, patients, the total hip or knee replacement offers the most effective treatment for the debilitating and distressing health problems associated with osteoarthritis. Those are the treatments of choice for most older patients and the latest figures show that 35,000 primary hip replacement operations and 25,000 primary knee replacements are carried out annually by the NHS in England.

My hon. Friend will be reassured to know that the Government are determined to cut NHS waiting lists and thus reduce waiting times for all patients. Patients needing orthopaedic procedures are already benefiting from the action we have taken: during 1998–99, the number of patients waiting for NHS treatment was reduced by 225,000 and almost 500,000 extra patients were treated in the same time. Since March 1998, the number of people waiting for hip and knee replacements and other orthopaedic procedures has fallen by 12 per cent., and the number of people waiting more than 12 months has fallen by 13 per cent. I hope that she welcomes those figures.

Such operations represent two of the great success stories of the NHS. People move from being confined to a wheelchair or their homes and become mobile and free of pain. They are then able to lead more independent lives, with all the benefits that that brings to them, their carers and the wider community. The national Horizon scanning centre has also identified several other new drugs that treat musculo-skeletal disorders. NICE is currently considering whether they should also be fast-tracked for assessment because they could provide a substantial added benefit to a large group of patients suffering from arthritis.

My hon. Friend expressed her concerns about measures to help disabled people into work, especially those suffering from arthritis. Most disabled people are able to make very effective use of mainstream employment and training programmes. However, for some people who are unemployed, such as people with arthritis, their disability represents an additional hurdle in their search for work. That is why there are specialist programmes to help them find, keep and train for work. The Employment Service plans to spend £189 million this year on specialist programmes to help those with disabilities, including people with arthritis.

My hon. Friend also expressed her concern for children. The Education Act 1996 sets out arrangements for identifying and providing for children with special educational needs in accordance with a statutory code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs. Parents who think that their child may have special educational needs can ask their local education authority to assess their child's needs. The authority has responsibility for determining whether the child has special educational needs and what provision should be made to meet them.

The schools access initiative gives capital support for projects to make mainstream schools more accessible for pupils with disabilities, including those suffering from arthritis. In 1999–2000, £20 million will be available, which is a fivefold expansion of the £4 million inherited from the previous Government. That forms part of a £100 million programme over the next three years.

I have tried to outline some of the measures that we have taken or set in train to improve the quality of life for arthritis sufferers. There is clearly still a great deal to do. We look forward to working in partnership with Arthritis Care and others who share our ambition, as my hon. Friend does, to see that services for people who suffer from this condition continue to develop and improve in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*By Order*)
Order for consideration, as amended, read.
To be considered on Tuesday 21 December.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rail Services

2. **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries): When he last met representatives of train operating companies running rail services between Scotland and England. [101220]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I last met representatives of Great North Eastern Railway Ltd. on 19 November.

Mr. Brown: I thank the Secretary of State for that short reply to a short question. Will he give me an undertaking that the much-needed modernisation of the west coast main line is a priority that will be stressed to Railtrack in Scotland? Will he also stress to Railtrack the need to ensure that there is adequate investment at railway stations, such as the one in Lockerbie, to meet the needs of disabled people?

Dr. Reid: Yes, I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are taking robust action, through the Rail Regulator, to deal with the situation to which he refers. The Rail Regulator announced on 5 November that he was taking enforcement action and demanding that Railtrack produce plans to meet its commitments for additional capacity as part of the upgrade and improvement of the west coast main line. The modernisation of that line will include remodelling schemes, resignalling, track and structure work and electrification, and is expected to cost some £2.2 billion.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Will the Secretary of State undertake to ensure that when the Strategic Rail Authority is established, it acknowledges that the east coast main line goes from London to Aberdeen, and not from London to Edinburgh and then to Aberdeen? Will he undertake to support the campaign for full electrification of the entire length of the line?

Dr. Reid: I use the east coast line—not only the part that goes to Glasgow and Edinburgh, but occasionally the part that goes to Aberdeen—so I certainly hope that the hon. Gentleman's views are taken into account. He will be pleased to know that when the Strategic Rail Authority is formed, it will, as promised by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, have a representative from Scotland, and I am sure that he or she will bear in mind the point that the hon. Gentleman is making.

Poverty Alleviation

3. **Mr. David Marshall** (Glasgow, Shettleston): What discussions he has held with the Scottish Executive on UK–wide initiatives for the alleviation of poverty; and if he will make a statement. [101221]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): Along with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretaries of State for Social Security and for Wales and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), I met Scottish Ministers and Ministers from the other devolved Administrations on 9 December to discuss the alleviation of poverty. That meeting, the first of its kind, is a real example of partnership in action.

Mr. Marshall: I appreciate the Government's efforts in that respect, and I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Will he disregard the north-south divide and consider instead the east-west divide? Does he agree that statistics prove that most of the prosperity and well-being in Scotland is in the east of the country, and most of the poverty and poor health is in the west, especially in the city of Glasgow?

Does my right hon. Friend further agree that while Glasgow may be a great place for tourists and for people who live outside the city, thus avoiding paying the city's council tax yet using all its amenities, it is now high time to make Glasgow once again great for all the good people who live in the city? Will he therefore do his utmost to ensure that the joint action Committee of both Parliaments gives a high priority to tackling the problems faced by the people of Glasgow?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend. I have always considered Glasgow to be a great city, which of course does not mean that there are not areas of poverty—especially, as recent reports have pointed out, in my hon. Friend's constituency—that blight the city. Those areas are not exclusive to Glasgow; there are areas of poverty throughout Scotland and the United Kingdom. I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that Ministers will make every effort, particularly by working with Scottish Ministers, to deliver a better life.

My hon. Friend will probably be aware that the report that produced the damning figures on Glasgow is some years old and it is a measure of the challenge that the Labour Government faced when we came to power. My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that, under present projections for the working families tax credit, the minimum wage and the

biggest ever increase in child benefit, we can expect that by 2002 some 60,000 children in Scotland will be lifted out of poverty, and many of those will be in Glasgow. That is the beginning of what will be a very long but vital effort by the Government and the Scottish Executive's working partnership to remove the scar of poverty from the face of Scotland.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): The Secretary of State will know from his surgeries, as will all hon. Members, how many people in poverty have difficulty accessing the benefits system and coping with its complexity, particularly because of recent cuts in the provision of advice centres. What discussions did he have at the ministerial meeting about how better advice and provision could be given to people, at a UK level and a Scotland level, to ensure that those in the worst poverty have access to all the benefits available to them?

Dr. Reid: That is a feature of regular discussion between UK Ministers, and between us and our Scottish colleagues. It is one of the reasons why we introduced the hotline for the working families tax credit. As the hon. Gentleman will know, that will make a considerable contribution to the alleviation of poverty by guaranteeing a minimum income wage of £200 for any family with one member working. The last time that I checked, that hotline had received almost 40,000 inquiries from Scotland. It is a measure of our commitment to combat poverty and to deliver—not in theory, but in practice—real help where it is needed.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Given that the statistics of deprivation in Glasgow are so well known, what does my right hon. Friend make of an article by George Kerevan, a prominent nationalist, which was published in *The Scotsman* yesterday, in which he accuses Glasgow of whingeing? Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a typical example of nationalist hypocrisy, whereby in Glasgow nationalists present themselves as fighters for the poor, but in Edinburgh they accuse the poor of whingeing? How does that contrast with the Government's attempt to overcome poverty in Glasgow?

Dr. Reid: I have had an opportunity to see that article by a member of the Scottish National party. To suggest that Glasgow is whingeing about a deep and disturbing problem of poverty is to cast a disgraceful slur on the people of Glasgow. Wherever co-operation in the effort to improve people's daily life is sought, the nationalists create discord. That the nationalists are more interested in getting Scotland out of the UK than in getting poverty out of Scotland has been well marked by the Scottish people.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I am delighted to hear that the Secretary of State has met his Scottish counterparts to discuss the problem of poverty in Scotland, but I hope he will excuse my asking for clarification about what went on at that meeting. I assume that it was a meeting of the first joint ministerial committee: if so, what was its precise remit in respect of poverty? On the face of it, the allocation of funds from Scotland's block grant funding is a matter for the Scottish Executive—although representations made to the UK Government about changes to social security funding might be relevant. However, the impression that I derived from listening to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) was that he hoped that the Secretary of State would lecture the Scottish Executive on how to go about their business. What was going on at that meeting?

Dr. Reid: I know that it is difficult for the hon. Gentleman to understand the concept of working with others, even within his own party, but we are quite capable of co-operating with others. If his question is about how we bring together various efforts to combat poverty, my answer is simple. The UK Government can, for example, restore free eye tests for old-age pensioners, which were removed by the Conservative Government; we can provide the biggest ever increase in child benefit; we can introduce a minimum guaranteed income for pensioners; we can introduce the working families tax credit, which benefits 140,000 Scots; and we can introduce the long-awaited and much-needed minimum wage. By implementing their policies on social exclusion, the Scottish Executive can target resources on areas such as those mentioned by my hon. Friends and, through the national health service, redistribute funds to the areas of greatest need. That is called building a broad consensus backed by co-operative effort, but I understand that almost none of those words are understood, either in theory or in practice, by the Conservatives.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): My right hon. Friend is aware of, and has already referred to, the report published on Thursday 2 December by the Townsend centre for international poverty research at the university of Bristol. He will also be aware that the statistical base of that research dated from 1991 to 1995 and that—contrary to the spin put on the report by the Scottish National party—it reveals not the failure of our Government's policies, but the extent of the problem that we inherited. If we are to address the problems and, in particular, achieve the target that we set in the pre-Budget report for reducing child poverty, we need to integrate public services, both devolved and reserved. Instead of making public services report on how they are doing that, will my right hon. Friend ensure that they actually do it?

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is either incompetent or hypocritical of the Scottish National party to blame on a new Labour Government who have been in power for only two and a half years the poverty revealed in a report based on six-year-old statistics. Many areas of Scotland are deeply scarred by poverty, but I can confidently predict that, through the measures that I have described, 60,000 children will be lifted out of poverty and a major start will be made on a generation-long programme to end poverty in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

As for the second part of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, I pledge that the efforts of both the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Executive will be harnessed to ensure that devolution is much more than a constitutional discussion, so that we get away from talking about processes and territorial claims over powers and move on to implementing what the Scottish people want, which is to deliver the means of them having a better life for themselves and their children.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): Does the Secretary of State accept that the Government's continuation of the previous Conservative Government's spending targets, not for the first year of their term in office but for the second, means that they are responsible for prolonging the agony of people whose plight was highlighted by the report to which the Secretary of State has referred?

Dr. Reid: If anyone on either side of the House thinks that the Conservative Government would have introduced the minimum wage, the working families tax credit, the huge increase in child benefit, the restoration of free eye tests or a £100 bonus at Christmas for our old people, he or she does not understand the nature of politics in Britain—or prefers, for his or her own purposes, to disregard them.

The hon. Gentleman may not have noticed the public expenditure figures issued yesterday, which were independently compiled. They show that people in Scotland receive, on average, 15 per cent. more per head than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is £120 per head as opposed to £104. The hon. Gentleman cannot stand Scotland playing a full part in the United Kingdom partnership, and the United Kingdom being shown to be fair and of benefit to the people of Scotland. Unfortunately for him and his party, both are true.

European Elections

4. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What assessment he has made of the operation of the electoral system in Scotland for European parliamentary elections. [101222]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): My right hon Friend has made no such assessment. Responsibility for the system for European parliamentary elections lies with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who is currently undertaking a review of this matter.

Dr. Lewis: Is it not a shame that the Secretary of State has not assessed the implications of the proportional representation list system in European elections for Scotland arising from a recent development in England, namely, the resignation of Pauline Green, the former leader of the party of European socialists and Labour MEPs for London, to take a better paid job only six months after she stood for, and was elected to, the European Parliament under a Labour ticket? Is that not a weakness of the system, in that the electorate will have no chance to punish the Labour party in a by-election? The next candidate will take Buggins' turn and move up into the space vacated by the rather dishonourable tactics of the lady to whom I have referred.

Mr. Wilson: I have no idea why the hon. Gentleman thinks that the resignation of Pauline Green is relevant to Scottish Question Time. *[Interruption.]* It may be that her mother was Scottish; I do not know. That is the only legitimacy that I can question. We assess or reassess electoral systems not on the basis of individual behaviour, but on whether they are right for democracy in this country. That is a much better form of motivation and one that the Tories could not conceivably understand.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Speaking as a federalist and a supporter of electoral reform, may I say to my hon. Friend that a new electoral system was well understood by the people of Scotland, and that that was particularly true after the elections to the Scottish Parliament? I look forward to a referendum on proportional representation for this place. Does he agree that the whingeing from Opposition Members plays into the hands of the secessionists and day trippers in the Scottish National party?

Mr. Wilson: As my hon. Friend opened his question with the words, "Speaking as a federalist", a brief reply is appropriate. Speaking as a representative of Her Majesty's Government, I can assure him that there will be no change in the electoral system to the House without a referendum. That is absolutely clear. With regard to the European system, it is worth pointing out, in the interests of balance, that under the first-past-the-post system, the by-election in the north-east of Scotland, which was the last test under that system, attracted a turnout of 20.5 per cent., which suggests that there was not exactly a lather of excitement there, either.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the Minister admit that 20.5 per cent. is hardly an excuse for abolishing by-elections? Will he tell the Secretary of State, who has been uncharacteristically lugubrious this afternoon, to cheer himself up by going along to his colleague the Home Secretary—*[Interruption.]* Of course the Secretary of State knows what "lugubrious" means. Will he tell the Home Secretary that no true democrat can conceivably support a system where party comes before candidate, and that in Scotland, at least, people will have no truck with that?

Mr. Wilson: I do not want to intervene in the dialogue between the hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend. On the subject of who is lugubrious, it takes one to know one. With reference to the first-past-the-post system and the constituency link, it is extremely important to maintain the link between constituency and Member of Parliament, as happened in Scotland in the case of the constituency-elected MSPs. There must and will be no change in elections to the House without the matter being put to the British people.

EU Rebate

5. **Mr. Bill Tynan** (Hamilton, South): What representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the benefit to Scotland of Britain's rebate from the European Union. [101223]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is conscious of the benefit that the UK generally, and Scotland in particular, derive from the

UK's abatement from the European Union. That is why its maintenance was successfully negotiated at the Berlin European Council in March 1999.

Mr. Tynan: I thank my hon. Friend for that short reply. On the positive aspects of our relationship with Europe, and the fact that Scotland as an exporting nation derives great benefit from it, does he agree that the employment aspects and the number of jobs protected in Scotland through that relationship are extremely important?

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend is right. The agreement that has been negotiated on objective 2 by the United Kingdom will benefit large parts of his area. The agreement negotiated by the Prime Minister on the highlands and islands will benefit large parts of Scotland, which need that continuing support. On many fronts, we benefit from the European relationship and the funding. It is worth reminding the House—I see that the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) is about to stand up. She will remember that, in the European Parliament, the Scottish nationalists voted against the British rebate. In 1999, it is worth £2.8 billion to the UK, which is equivalent to £48 for every person in Scotland. That is what the nationalists voted against, which I suppose is why "nats" is similar to "Santa" in reverse.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Leaving aside those points, the Minister and I recognise the complexities involved in the arrangements. When we speak about rebates, can we also speak about contributions, not least those made by Scotland to the European Union through the agricultural industry? Will the Minister confirm that today, Prime Minister Jospin was prepared to accept into the French market grass-fed herds from Scotland, but that that was turned down by Whitehall? Can he advise me, the House and the agriculture industry what were the roles of the Scottish Office and of the Minister responsible for agriculture in the Scottish Parliament? Where does that leave the alliance, and who is fighting for the Scottish farmers?

Mr. Wilson: I note that the hon. Lady sensibly avoided the fact that the nationalists voted against the subject of the question, which is the British rebate. In other words, they voted against £48 for every person in Scotland, which does not serve the people of Scotland very well—including, incidentally, the agricultural community.

As for Prime Minister Jospin's comments today, let me make it absolutely clear that there is no substance in the claim about the tripartite discussions involving the French, the United Kingdom and the European Commission. Even if such an offer had been made, it would not have been the proper basis on which to proceed.

Even the nationalists, who thrive on division, should think very carefully before backing this. All along, the French have been anxious to drive a wedge into British policy and to achieve an outcome based on a herd-by-herd policy, rather than accepting the European Union's legislative position that all United Kingdom beef that meets the date-based export scheme criteria is safe. In accepting the attempt by the French to divide and rule—not in formal negotiations, but in briefing—the hon. Lady is working not only against the interests of many British farmers, but against those of some Scottish farmers.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House will have noted that we have got through only four questions in nearly half an hour.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

The Advocate-General was asked—

European Convention on Human Rights

25. **Mr. David Stewart** (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): When she last met the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor-General for Scotland to discuss the implementation in Scotland of the European convention on human rights. [101243]

27. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What discussions she has had with the Law Officers in Scotland on implementation of the European convention on human rights in Scotland. [101245]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): I meet the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor-General regularly to discuss matters of mutual interest.

Mr. Stewart: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for her reply, and welcome her to her post. What views has she had from court about the implementation of the European convention on human rights, and what is her view of the Fort William case, which has been given a ruling under the convention in regard to limits for legal aid?

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I thank my hon. Friend for his introductory remarks.

The main issues that have been raised relate to criminal proceedings and alleged breaches of article 6 of the convention. That article relates to the right to a fair trial. The issues involved concern delay in proceedings, access of the accused to a solicitor, legal aid, temporary sheriffs and self-incrimination in road traffic cases. In regard to civil proceedings, there have been challenges to provisions of the Mental Health (Public Safety and Appeals) (Scotland) Act 1999.

I understand that there has been a Crown appeal in relation to the Fort William case, but in the circumstances the case is sub judice and it would not be appropriate for me to comment further.

Mr. Dalyell: How is the early introduction of the convention working?

The Advocate-General for Scotland: It is working very well. The Government were elected to modernise the British constitution, and giving further effect to the convention and providing domestic remedies is an important part of that. As my hon. Friend will know, the Human Rights Act 1998 will come into effect throughout

the United Kingdom next year and, under the Scotland Act 1998, the convention already applies to the Scottish Parliament and to the Executive. That is an integral part of the devolution settlement. It gives the individual the right to challenge in court, by raising a devolution issue, matters that allegedly contravene convention rights. That is good for both individual liberty and democratic government, and the people of Scotland are the first to benefit.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): As the Advocate-General knows, I hold her in high and affectionate regard, and I hope that she will not take my question amiss.

Using the example that she has just given us, can the Advocate-General tell us exactly what her job is?

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I was unaware of the affectionate regard, but I am delighted to hear of it.

If the right hon. and learned Gentleman had read the Scotland Act 1998, he would have at least a clue to my duties. Under the Act, I have certain statutory duties, including the ability to refer Scottish Parliament legislation to the Privy Council in certain circumstances. I have certain interests relating to devolution issues, to which I referred earlier, and I have also inherited the opinion work of the Lord Advocate. In my role as a United Kingdom Law Officer, I advise the UK Government and Departments about devolved and reserved Scottish matters. I also advise on more general matters such as human rights and European law. I attend several Cabinet Committees—five at the last count. Is that reply sufficient for the right hon. and learned Gentleman? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. and learned Lady was asked a question. Let her answer.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Defamation Victims

33. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the remedies available to the victims of defamers without assets. [101251]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): Criminal libel is available, although it is rarely used, and the Attorney-General's consent to a prosecution is required. Under any other circumstances, the courts are open to everyone, regardless of means. New rules of court for defamation proceedings will be introduced in the new year. They will make it possible for defamation claims to be tackled more quickly and at a lower cost than at present. We also intend to consult in the new year on perceived abuses of defamation procedures.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the Minister for that answer and I declare an interest as a victim of a destitute defamer. I also thank the Minister for the time that he has already spent discussing and corresponding with me about this difficult matter. Does he accept that there is currently no civil remedy that is practically available to the victim of a destitute defamer, because it is impossible to sue such a person without incurring irrecoverable costs and having to pay them when the defamer goes bankrupt?

I am glad that the Minister acknowledges that the possibility of criminal libel proceedings continues to exist. In his review, will he consider using the law on harassment to deal with persistent destitute defamers; and will he bear it in mind that, in the age of the internet, anyone without assets can defame someone with impunity on a worldwide basis?

Mr. Lock: The hon. Gentleman has raised many issues. I shall deal first with the internet. I accept his point, although, as he knows, the regulation of the internet involves much wider issues than defamation. We must consider several issues in connection with the review of defamation procedures. The hon. Gentleman has raised one, but complaints have also been made about rich and powerful people using the law of defamation and the law of contempt to attempt to suppress legitimate comment about themselves and their activities. There are complaints from both ends of the spectrum. However, I understand the hon. Gentleman's anxieties, some of which will be addressed in the consultation paper that we intend to issue in the new year.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): On that point, what about people who claim that they have been defamed, but the action that they bring is bankrolled by other people? I am thinking of no particular individual when I ask that question, but if the action subsequently fails, surely the bankrollers should be liable for the costs?

Mr. Lock: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point and I share his anxiety. Anyone who puts an individual in funds, through a blind trust, to libel or support the prosecution of a libel, approaches the line where the courts might look to that party for costs or damages if the case fails. It would not be right to comment on any particular case, but those who procure or fund others to fight libel cases may find themselves responsible for the consequences of their actions. It is a matter for the courts.

Magistrates

34. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): What plans she has to increase the total number of magistrates. [101252]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor requires his local advisory committees to recommend for appointment sufficient magistrates to enable the courts to operate efficiently. The number of lay magistrates has increased by approximately 8.5 per cent. since 1988, to a total of 30,260 on 1 January 1999.

Mr. Waterson: I thank the Minister for that answer. However, does she accept that one of the consequences of the Government's proposals to abolish trial by jury is that, in most cases, the magistrate can make the ultimate decision about where a defendant has to face trial?

Does she further accept that that must mean extra pressure on lists in magistrates courts? The direct result of that must be a need to recruit more magistrates.

Jane Kennedy: There has of course been a recent recruitment drive, which resulted in a large number of applications, and some applicants are being appointed at the moment. Local and central recruitment initiatives are being undertaken.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Is the Minister aware that a number of magistrates in Gravesham have said that they would leave the Bench if the Kent magistrates courts committee goes ahead with its proposal to close Gravesend magistrates court, and that their opposition to the proposal is shared by the local police, the citizens advice bureau, the local authorities and most of my constituents? Is she further aware that the committee has been criticised in a recent inspection report for its failure properly to consult on proposals for closure? Will she therefore make clear to the committee the importance of consulting the local community before going ahead with such plans?

Jane Kennedy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. Kent magistrates courts committee is responsible under statute for the efficient and effective running of the courts in its area. I expect it to respond constructively to the inspectorate's recommendations, and my officials are monitoring the situation in Kent. They and the inspectorate are offering support to the committee, and I have asked my officials to keep me closely informed of developments.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): On 25 November last, we debated in Committee an increase in the number of stipendiary magistrates and Members from all three parties emphasised the continuing importance of the lay magistracy. The Minister informed the Committee that research into the cost of the magistracy was to be commissioned by her Department. Has the tender for the research been accepted, and who has been accepted to conduct it? Will she confirm that no precipitate action will be taken in relation either to the lay or to the stipendiary magistracy without full consultation?

Jane Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman has asked me a number of questions and I shall write to him on the detail, but I understand that that detail is in the public arena. There is support from both sides of the House for the principle of the lay magistracy and the Government are committed to its continuing to play a significant part in the criminal justice system.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): While my hon. Friend's Department is not responsible for the appointment of magistrates in the county of Lancashire, does she think that enough is being done to ensure that magistrate appointments—not only in number, but in width and scope—are representative of the communities that magistrates serve? Representation should be as wide as in juries for trials.

Jane Kennedy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that good point, which he made very well. He might like to know that although the Lancashire advisory committee has not yet established its recruitment needs for the coming year, its initial feeling is that there is a general shortage of applicants in Lancashire—in particular, of Labour supporters.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister accept that not only the number of magistrates, but the number of court buildings is at issue? Under the Government's proposals, both in relation to the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill, it is likely that there will be far more magistrates courts trials. Does she accept that it may be essential for the Government to reconsider aspects of the closure of magistrates courts and give indications to local magistrates courts committees?

Will the Minister reconsider the undertaking that she gave to the Committee, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett)—that she would either write to me and to other members of the Committee with the details of whether the Government were reconsidering the compliance cost of the 1998 Act in the light of the likelihood of more magistrates courts trials taking place, or would put those details in the Library? I checked with the Library no more than 10 minutes ago and nothing has yet been placed there. The Minister gave her undertaking two weeks ago. I hope that she agrees that she should have written to us all by now.

Jane Kennedy: The answer is being prepared and will be delivered to members of the Committee. I apologise if I have kept them waiting, but I wanted to get the details right. The Government are committed to modernising the service provided by magistrates courts committees. We believe that it is a matter for local determination and that it is better for local magistrates courts committees to decide on the provision for the area. They have the best view of that as they are the local providers. This year we are spending £16 million on improvements to magistrates courts in addition to the on-going court building programme.

Lichfield Courts

35. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If she will make a statement on the future of the magistrates and county courts in Lichfield. [101253]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): The hon. Member will be aware from our meeting on 10 November that on 2 September 1999, Staffordshire magistrates courts committee made its final determination to close the Lichfield magistrates court, with effect from 28 February 2000, and sittings will cease there from 31 December 1999. The appeal process is under way and in September 1998 the Lord Chancellor gave permission to begin a public consultation exercise on the proposal to close the Lichfield county court. That has now concluded. A number of detailed responses were received which I am considering carefully.

Madam Speaker: Mr. Harry Cohen.

Mr. Fabricant: Do I remind you of him, Madam Speaker?

I thank the Minister for her detailed reply. She said that the matter is still under consideration, but is she aware that the Staffordshire magistrates court committee has decided to refer no more cases to Lichfield magistrates court from the end of this year? Is it not prejudging her decision? When the excellent local newspaper, the *Express & Star*, questioned Mr. Peter Wooliscroft, chief executive of the Staffordshire magistrates court committee, he said, "The court is not closing. We just won't be using it." Is that not prejudging the Minister's decision, and is it not wrong?

Jane Kennedy: I acknowledge the robust and persistent representations that the hon. Gentleman has made on the proposed closure of the courts at Lichfield. The decision by the magistrates courts committee to cease listing cases at Lichfield does not prejudge the decision on the appeal. The decision on the court building will be made on the merits of the case.

Health and Safety Offences

36. **Mr. Harry Cohen** (Leyton and Wanstead): What plans the Lord Chancellor has to issue guidelines to judges on sentencing for health and safety offences. [101254]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): Maximum and, in rare cases, minimum sentences are determined by Parliament. Within those limits there is no role for Parliament or for my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor to issue sentencing guidelines. Judges and magistrates determine the appropriate sentence in individual cases, taking account of guidance from the higher courts. The criminal division of the Court of Appeal gives guidelines on key issues. It has recently given guidance on sentencing in health and safety matters in the case of R. *v.* Howe and Son.

Mr. Cohen: Will my hon. Friend communicate my congratulations to the Lord Chancellor on his 1 December speech to the Trades Union Congress on breaches of health and safety law? He said that judges should be reminded of their sentencing power and that the Government planned to introduce legislation to extend the maximum sentence and to allow for imprisonment for health and safety offences. Will my hon. Friend keep getting over the message that judges should come down hard on those who breach health and safety laws, risking injury and, indeed, people's lives?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I will certainly communicate his congratulations to my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor. He is perfectly right: the Court of Appeal in the case of R. *v.* Howe and recently in the case of R. *v.* Rollco Screw and Rivet Co. Ltd. emphasised that the earlier fines were too low and that a fine should be sufficient to bring home to the management and the shareholders of a company that a breach of health and safety regulations that puts employees in danger is a serious matter. My noble and learned Friend put that most strongly in the speech to which my hon. Friend referred.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): In his earlier answer, in which he suggested that the courts might be at liberty to pursue those who put up funds in defamation cases, was the Minister seeking to issue a Lord Chancellor's guideline, or was he resting his point of view on the law?

Madam Speaker: Order. That supplementary question is quite out of order. We have one minute left and I call Mrs. Jacqui Lait.

Leisure Facility Licences

37. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): If she will issue guidance to magistrates on taking into account evidence of smuggled tobacco and alcohol in the premises concerned when considering applications for the renewal of public house, club and restaurant licences. [101255]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): The Government do not issue guidance on the way in which judicial discretion should be exercised. Magistrates consider all the evidence that is presented at a renewal hearing. Any evidence of the presence of smuggled tobacco and alcohol on premises would clearly be relevant in reaching a decision, but that is obviously a matter for magistrates.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply, but is she aware that there is increasing evidence that landlords, whether willingly or unwillingly, are finding that smuggled tobacco and alcohol are sold on their premises? There appears to be increasing evidence that licensing magistrates are not taking that into account. Does she not think that that is a matter of concern, given that the Government's policy is to crack down on smuggling and bootlegging, not to deal with the basic problem by reducing the tax?

Jane Kennedy: If what the hon. Lady says is true, it would be a matter of concern, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer has recently announced measures that should help to detect smuggled alcohol and tobacco. They include use of a national network of X-ray scans to help to detect bulk shipments of smuggled tobacco; compulsory marking of United Kingdom duty-paid cigarettes and tobacco; and new offences and penalties for people who are caught smuggling, handling or selling untaxed tobacco.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Food Safety

48. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If she will make a statement on the work of the ministerial group on food safety. [101267]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The ministerial group has completed its programme of work overseeing the setting up of the Food Standards Agency.

The group has, therefore, been wound up, although the Government continue to maintain a close interest in all food safety issues.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the President of the Council for that reply. As, most unusually, I shall have to be absent from business questions on Thursday, may I take the opportunity to wish her a merry Christmas and a happy new year?

To return as speedily as possible to normal service, does the ministerial group on food safety intend urgently to examine the safety, or otherwise, of imported French turkeys, especially in the light of media reports that their poultry feed may contain human and animal sewage, or do Ministers intend simply to imitate the potentially poisonous birds in question?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes and return them. Business questions will definitely not be the same without him, but I am sure that normal service will be resumed in the new year.

With regard to the issue of the safety, or otherwise, of imported French turkeys, as I have said, the committee has been wound up, but the hon. Gentleman will know that, in effect, a shadow Food Standards Agency is in existence with officials from the relevant ministries. I will draw his observations to the attention of that group, but he will appreciate that it is not a matter for me any more.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend seriously consider the absurdity of the situation that, 20 years ago, this country did away with country of origin marking, which many of us felt was essential, and is now required to label only for British goods? I and many consumers would warmly welcome not only safety measures, but country of origin marking for all imported goods into the UK. If we have to face the spurious argument that safety is involved, is it not time that what was literally sauce for the goose is sauce for that particular gander?

Mrs. Beckett: Oh dear! I feel a range of horrible jokes coming on in the run-up to the Christmas season.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. She will know that, in general, the Government are sympathetic to clear and informative labelling. She will also know that that has been a matter of some controversy throughout the European Union, but I understand that, for a variety of reasons, including the events to which we have referred, those matters are being examined.

Millennium Compliance

49. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): If she will make a statement on the preparedness of the national infrastructure to deal with the millennium date change. [101268]

53. **Dr. Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test): If she will make a statement on the ability of the national infrastructure to cope with the millennium date change. [101272]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Independent assessments show that all the key sectors and processes of the national infrastructure, such as utilities, emergency services, cash and food supply have achieved blue status, showing that there is no identified risk of material disruption over the date change period as a result of the bug. That is very good news, although I stress that there is no room for complacency.

All providers of essential services should continue to check and recheck their business critical systems and ensure that they have well-tested business continuity plans in place to deal with any unexpected problems that might arise.

Mr. Borrow: During the summer, I visited my local water treatment works to be briefed on the progress being made towards dealing with the millennium bug, and I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's answer that 100 per cent. blue cover will be reached by the end of the year. Can she assure me that any constituents of mine whose systems for electricity, gas, telephone or water fail can be certain that that will have had nothing to do with the millennium bug?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I am grateful to him for making that distinction. As I am sure he will know, there are a variety of relatively small-scale service failures on any ordinary day. For example, 40,000 people on average are without power on any particular day. I know from my experience and from the reports of other hon. Members that there are occasions when cash machines, for instance, are not replete with money. We cannot undertake that such everyday problems will not be replicated over the new year, but my hon. Friend is right to draw a distinction between ordinary failures and the effect of the millennium bug.

Dr. Whitehead: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. I am pleased that the UK infrastructure is now fully millennium compliant, and especially glad that the national grid will not fail during my new year celebrations in Southampton. However, does she anticipate any problems arising as a result of the knock-on effects in this country of the possible failure of systems or services in other countries?

Mrs. Beckett: Certainly, everything has been done to encourage all of those organisations and services that depend on international links in their supply chain to assess those links and pursue them to their origin. That process has also been subject to independent assessment. However, my hon. Friend is entirely right that we cannot be as confident of the scale and nature of preparations elsewhere as we can of those in this country. That is why we have encouraged people to make contingency plans, to follow them through and to have them independently assessed also.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Can the President of the Council confirm that Parliament is to keep its telephone and computer systems on over the millennium? Is it not regrettable that that decision was not made until this month, even though it was asked for in February? Is that really the example that we should be giving to industry?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and to those other hon. Members who serve with him on the Information Committee, as I know that they have taken a great interest in the matter. It has been a difficult decision for the House authorities to have to make, as it of course has staffing implications and the authorities are, as all good employers should be, mindful of employees' wish to be with their families at this time of celebration. I had not recalled that the question was raised so long ago, but I am sure that the House will be pleased with the decision that has been made. As I said, I am grateful for the advice of the Committee.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Given the impossibility of checking the compliance of all computer systems without live tests, will the President of the Council say what measures have been taken to put emergency services on standby and back-up over the holiday, in the event that the confidence that she has expressed is not justified? On a slightly different topic, what assurances can she give the House that the Financial Services Authority's indications that several major institutions may yet face closure have now been rescinded, or is there still a possibility that there will not be enough cash to go around?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman raises several matters. On the first, I can tell him that one element of the assessment process that we have insisted on across the national infrastructure is that proper contingency planning be prepared against the event of other failures. The requirement is that back-up be provided where possible, and that people identify ways of working around difficulties elsewhere.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the FSA and about some of the companies on which the authority has reported. He also asked about cash. The FSA has confirmed that it does not now anticipate that failures such as the hon. Gentleman described will be more common in its sector than in any other, and has reported that its sector is blue. The financial sector looked into the provision of cash very early on, and that matter has been blue for a considerable time.

50. **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside): What assessment she has made of the United Kingdom's public information programme on the millennium bug. [101269]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Regular research is undertaken of people's perception of the millennium bug and the Government's information programme. The research has been conducted monthly since January 1999. The main findings, which are in the Library, show that overall public concern about the effects of the bug remains low, while awareness of the term "millennium bug" is high, at over 90 per cent. The Government and Action 2000 can claim some credit for this low level of concern, because our public information programme has been well received and has been able to counter some alarmist reports.

Mrs. Ellman: How does my hon. Friend see the public information campaign progressing between now and the millennium period? How does what has been done in this country compare with what has happened elsewhere—for example, in the United States?

Mr. Tipping: There will be further newspaper articles to counter any alarmist reports. The Government, as always, will conduct a vigorous rebuttal campaign, and the matter is constantly under review.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will a series of helpline numbers be published so that people know about them during the millennium period when many ordinary services will be closed? How will those numbers be publicised? Will all Members of Parliament be informed of them? Is the hon. Gentleman entirely satisfied that all contingency planning is adequate?

Mr. Tipping: My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has written to all Members of Parliament today, giving them information about how they, in particular, can receive information over the millennium period from 31 December to 5 January. Action 2000 will continue to operate its helpline over the period. As the hon. Gentleman knows, every household in the country has received the booklet, "What you should know about the millennium bug". A range of information numbers are contained in it. Contingency planning and millennium operating regimes have been looked at carefully and consistently. We are not complacent, but we are quietly confident.

Sir Patrick Cormack: But will the numbers be published in the national press and other national media?

Mr. Tipping: The numbers are published in the booklet, and this week regional newspapers are running a series of features and advertisements; local numbers will be published in those.

Millennium Holiday

51. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What arrangements she has made for the discharging of the Government's responsibilities over the millennium holiday period. [101270]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The Government will be operating a millennium centre from 31 December to 7 January. The centre will provide briefings to Ministers and the media. All Departments and agencies have in place robust and tested business continuity plans and millennium operating regimes. As part of its MOR, each Department was required to identify the services to be delivered over the millennium period and has put in place measures to ensure that those services are delivered.

Dr. Ladyman: I congratulate the Government on that initiative. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking those who will operate that centre over the millennium period? Will he also thank all who will be providing emergency services over the same period? Will he assure me that they will be told that the only other meridian in the world is the Ramsgate meridian, that Ramsgate mean time is five minutes 41 seconds ahead of Greenwich mean time, and that therefore our celebrations—and any problems associated with the millennium—will be starting that much sooner in Ramsgate?

Mr. Tipping: I always knew that my hon. Friend was ahead of the field, although I thought it was by longer

than five minutes. I want to associate myself with his comments, with regard not just to those working in the millennium centre, but to the doctors and nurses working in the NHS, the police, the remaining emergency services and a range of people across the utilities and in the retail sector who are there to ensure that we can remember this millennium for all the right reasons.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): May I associate myself with those sentiments? Can the Minister also assure our diplomatic and military personnel posted overseas that they will be able to work independently of the local conditions pertaining over the holiday period and will still be able to do the job that we expect them to do?

Mr. Tipping: A great deal of work has gone into this issue. We are determined to ensure that our overseas businesses and nationals have the right support during the millennium period. We have planned and made arrangements as far as is possible, but some embassies will be dependent on sources of supply that are outside our control. However, even for those cases, contingency plans have been made.

Point of Order

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In view of the cancellation of the highly desirable visit of the Pope to Iraq, that war-torn land with terrible problems, have you had any request from a Foreign Office Minister to answer my Question 55 to the President of the Council, so that it can be explained whether pressure was put on the Vatican by Washington and London?

Madam Speaker: No. I see the hon. Gentleman's question on the Order Paper, but I have had no information from any of the Departments concerned.

Orders of the Day

Terrorism Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

3.31 pm

Mr. Straw: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill provides for permanent anti-terrorist powers for the police, other law enforcement agencies and the courts. Let me first explain to the House why we judge that such powers—powers additional to those of the general criminal law—are needed.

Terrorism involves the threat or use of serious violence for political, religious or ideological ends. It is premeditated, and aims to create a climate of extreme fear. While the direct victims may be specific or symbolic targets, they may also be selected at random. In any event, terrorism is aimed at influencing a wider target than its immediate victims.

Although all crime to some degree plainly threatens the stability of the social and political order, terrorism differs from crime motivated solely by greed in that it is directed at undermining the foundations of government. It poses special difficulties for those of us who live in liberal democracies. Our sense of outrage is all the greater because in such democracies the overwhelming majority of the population believe that there are adequate non-violent means for expressing opposition and dissent. However, we will have handed the terrorists the victory that they seek if, in combating their threats and violence, we descend to their level and undermine the essential freedoms and rule of law that are the bedrock of our democracy.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I accept the generality of the hon. Gentleman's comments, but will he help me on one point? Am I right in thinking that the actions of the Kosovo Liberation Army in combating the Serbs in Kosovo or, for that matter, those of the Kurds in fighting Saddam Hussein in north Iraq, fall within the scope of terrorism as defined in clauses 1 and 57?

Mr. Straw: I understand what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying, and in one sense he may be correct, but we are talking about terrorism in this country. I will deal with what is in clause 57 in a moment. Although clause 1 has a wider coverage than the current arrangements for Irish and international terrorism, such activities are already covered in the existing definitions of terrorism. The broadening of the Bill covers domestic terrorism. We are raising the threshold for triggering the powers in the Bill above the threshold in the temporary legislation. I shall come on to explain that point to the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Under the previous Government, Lord Lloyd of Berwick carried out a detailed inquiry into legislation against terrorism and reported to Parliament in October 1996. He opened the third chapter of his report by complimenting Gearty and Kimbell's publication "Terrorism and the Rule of Law". He said that the authors had identified three general principles that should govern

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any code of laws designed to counter violent subversion—equality of treatment before the law, fairness in application of the law, and respect for certain basic principles of human dignity.

In paragraph 3.1, Lord Lloyd went on to say:

"I favour the authors' approach in beginning from a set of principles, and these seem to me perfectly sound as far as they go. But they are not sufficiently descriptive for a review of this kind, so I have formulated my own as follows:

(i) Legislation against terrorism should approximate as closely as possible to the ordinary criminal law and procedure;

(ii) Additional statutory offences and powers may be justified, but only if they are necessary to meet the anticipated threat. They must then strike the right balance between the needs of security and the rights and liberties of the individual;

(iii) The need for additional safeguards should be considered alongside any additional powers;

(iv) The law should comply with the UK's obligations in international law."

In preparing the Bill, I have sought carefully to follow those four principles.

There is, however, a wider issue, particularly now, which is whether the threat of terrorism today is such that it justifies any specific legislation. The counter-terrorist legislation currently in force goes back to 1974, to the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Bill introduced into this House in late November of that year, a week after the terrible bombings in Birmingham in which 21 people were killed and 180 injured. On Second Reading, the then Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, said:

"I do not think that anyone would wish these exceptional powers to remain in force a moment longer than is necessary"—[*Official Report*, 25 November 1974; Vol. 882, c. 642.]

To underline that, the powers in the Bill were subject initially not to yearly, but to six-monthly review.

Despite the hope in 1974 that the need for counter-terrorist legislation would be short-lived, those powers—with amendments and additions—remain in force a quarter of a century later. In the interim, more than 2,000 people have died in the United Kingdom as a result of Irish and international terrorism, and thousands more have been injured. The toll would unquestionably have been greater without the anti-terrorist powers, and above all without the courage and commitment shown by members of the police and security forces over 25 years.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I endorse the tribute that my right hon. Friend has paid to the courage of police officers and armed forces personnel. Part VII of the Bill deals with Northern Ireland, the system of non-jury trial there and the appointment of an independent assessor of military complaints. If decommissioning occurred before the end of May to the satisfaction of General de Chastelain, the two Governments and the politicians of Northern Ireland, what implications would that have for the implementation of the Bill?

Mr. Straw: I shall deal with that point in more detail when I reach part VII, which is included in the Bill because the emergency provisions Act that covers Northern Ireland is due to expire next August. It was felt appropriate to bring these matters together. It is the fervent wish of hon. Members on both sides of the House and of the people of Northern Ireland that the emergency provisions should be withdrawn as soon as possible. One of the Bill's main purposes is to provide permanent counter-terrorist legislation that is not specific to Northern Ireland. We hope that so-called Irish terrorism will wither on the vine. If the Bill is enacted, either part of part VII—what amounts at present to the EPA—or the whole of it will be open to withdrawal by affirmative resolution of the House. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will want to take such action as soon as he judges it to be safe.

My hon. Friend's intervention reminds us that there is now a better chance for a lasting peace in the island of Ireland than at any time that any of us can recall. However, not everyone on either side of the religious divide is signed up to peace. It is only 16 months since the carnage at Omagh in which 29 people died and more than 200 were injured. In the same month, August 1998, there were particularly horrific examples of international terrorism, when bombs exploded outside United States embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, killing 257, mainly local, people and injuring thousands of others.

Lord Lloyd's inquiry was one of the most thorough ever conducted into the nature of the terrorist threat. Writing before Omagh, Dar es Salaam or Nairobi, Lord Lloyd concluded that, even when there was a lasting peace in Northern Ireland, the need for counter-terrorist legislation would remain. He recommended, however, that the legislation should cease to be specific to Northern Ireland, and that a new Bill should be brought in to put the provisions on a permanent footing.

The Government have accepted the central conclusion and recommendation of Lord Lloyd's inquiry: that even when what we judged to be a lasting peace had been achieved, there would remain a requirement for specific counter-terrorist legislation. We have consulted widely on how that recommendation should be effected. I point out to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) that, in effect, that process of consultation has been going on for at least three years, since the publication of Lord Lloyd's report. This time last year, I published a consultation document entitled "Legislation against Terrorism", and last Thursday I published a summary of the responses received. The Bill is thus the consequence of that long, open and deliberative process. In view of that, I hope that the House will accept that the examination of these provisions by a Special Standing Committee—which I understand the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey proposes—is not necessary.

In preparing the legislation, I have kept much in mind the four principles set out by Lord Lloyd, and the need to act fairly and proportionately. The Bill is not intended to threaten in any way the right to demonstrate peacefully—nor will it do so. It is not designed to be used in situations where demonstrations unaccountably turn ugly. Should any unlawful activities occur in such circumstances, the powers available under the ordinary criminal law will, as now, suffice.

I shall deal with the new definition of terrorism that we propose in the Bill, and with its application to all forms of terrorism. However, I make it clear that the new definition will not catch the vast majority of so-called domestic activist groups. To respond to a recent example,

I know of no evidence whatever that Greenpeace is involved in any activity that would fall remotely under the scope of this measure.

Mr. Hogg: If someone decided to break into a mink farm in order to release the mink from their cages, or to break into a research station and destroy the animals cages, that would clearly be an act of serious violence. It would be a criminal act—and one that I would deplore. But why should such organisations be classified as "terrorist" under clause 1?

Mr. Straw: Examples of the type given by the right hon. and learned Gentleman are easy to invent, but, in practice—

Mr. Hogg: Violence to property.

Mr. Straw: In practice, we are talking about the threat of serious violence. Of course, there is a fine dividing line.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Straw: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman would allow me to respond—

Madam Speaker: Order. As the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) has asked a question, he might listen to the answer.

Mr. Hogg: I apologise, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. Straw: There are people who claim to be in favour of so-called animal liberation who have engaged in actions that not only caused risks but resulted in the most serious violence to individuals, and have put people under threat of their lives. Such circumstances may well fall within the ambit of clause 1. Having said that, I believe that we must have some confidence in the law enforcement agencies and the courts. If we look back at the past 25 years, we can see that the powers have been used proportionately in the face of an horrific threat from terrorism in Ireland and a considerable threat from international terrorism. Moreover, as I have explained, we are raising the threshold of the definition in the Bill; we are adding to the powers in only one respect; and we are removing many powers to which hon. Members on both sides of the House have taken exception in the past.

The Bill does not focus on demonstrations, which are a normal activity in a democracy. I wholly defend people's right to go in for peaceful protest—indeed, many of my right hon. and hon. Friends and I have been involved in such peaceful protests.

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): We still are.

Mr. Straw: My Parliamentary Private Secretary says that we still are. Many of us have been involved in peaceful protests and I defend the right of peaceful protest. We are not talking about demonstrations that get out of hand.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North) *rose—*

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I will give way to both my hon. Friends in a minute.

Instead, the Bill focuses on the opposite end of the spectrum. It is about deterring, preventing and, where necessary, investigating heinous crime—heinous because terrorism seeks to destroy not only lives, but the foundation of our society. The Bill is therefore about protecting, not threatening, fundamental rights. In the words of the Home Office's principal purpose, it is about establishing a

"safe, just and tolerant society".

Mr. McNamara: My right hon. Friend has now introduced a new word—heinous. Is that to be the equivalent of serious? What criteria will he suggest police forces should adopt in bringing an action under clause 1? What is serious? What is heinous? Is it something that involves a real threat to life? Is it something deliberate or accidental? Will a cash value also be placed on the action, depending on the extent of the damage to property, or will it be simply a question of inconvenience? Those are very real problems, about which many people are worried, and "serious" is a very wide definition in these various matters.

Mr. Straw: I understand the point that my hon. Friend raises. We have to legislate with words because that is all we have, but we also have to trust and do more than trust—we must build safeguards into our framework of law to ensure that arrangements such as those in the Bill, which I accept at the outset go beyond the normal criminal law, are used responsibly and proportionately.

I know that my hon. Friend has changed his mind, but I remind him that he supported the original Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Bill in ringing tones when it came before the House on 28 November 1974. He fully supported his then right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, saying that the introduction of the Bill was

"the least he could do."

He also said that it would be

"sad, however, if we were to worry now too much about the curtailment of liberties and later to have upon our consciences the deaths of our fellow citizens."—[*Official Report*, 28 November 1974; Vol. 882, c. 700.]

I fully understand that my hon. Friend has changed his mind since then, but I draw his attention to the fact that the Bill that he supported at that stage had a lower threshold for the triggering of the powers than does the Bill before us.

There has been some almost wilful misunderstanding of the Bill by some who have taken exception to it in extravagant language. Clause 1 does not create an offence of terrorism. It sets out the extremely specific circumstances in which the use of police powers can be triggered, or in which the use of other powers can be triggered—also in very controlled circumstances. In each case, the powers—including the power of proscription—are subject to proper judicial adjudication.

Mr. McNamara: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for two reasons. First, he reminded me of my stupidity in believing that, when the 1974 PTA was passed, it would be in force for only six months. However, I was right at the time. Secondly, I want to remind my right hon. Friend that he, too, voted against the Prevention of Terrorism Acts. He also fought an election against going into the

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Common Market and an election in favour of repealing all the Conservative Government's industrial relations Acts. He also made speeches on other matters. Should he not bear it in mind that it is possible that not only St. Paul but he and I have had Damascene conversions?

The issue now is whether the circumstances that resulted in the passing of the Act in 1974—when to push us through the Lobby to vote in favour, promises were made and threats were whispered in the Corridors about the reintroduction of capital punishment if the legislation was not passed—apply at this time.

Mr. Straw: I understand something about conversions. I know that my hon. Friend has changed his mind on this subject. I was not in the House at that time, but my support for the principle of anti-terrorist legislation has perhaps been, since the 1980s, rather more consistent than his.

Mr. McNamara: Since the 1980s?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend would get a surprise if he looked at my voting record. As for the Common Market, he is right. Not only did I vote against our continued membership of the Common Market, I campaigned against it as an active member of the "No" campaign. However, you would rule me out of order, Madam Speaker, if I went too far on that.

I regard my hon. Friend as the epitome of rationality. I say to him that although he came to a different view in 1974, he did so with the same rational brain that all of us have come to know and love so much, and it would therefore have been possible for him to encompass a different judgment then. To offer him comfort, I tell him that the threshold that we are putting in the Bill for good reasons—circumstances have changed—is higher than existed then.

On the overall circumstances, I do not believe that it is possible to consider the continued potential for Irish terrorism from organisations and individuals who are not signed up to the peace agreement; the threat of international terrorism, which continues; or the potential threat of some domestic terrorism, and to say that there is no threat of terrorism. Notwithstanding that, it may be possible to assert that such threats should be dealt with within the existing criminal law and procedure—and we are principally talking about procedure rather than criminal law. Although I appreciate that point of view, I come to a different opinion. I draw particular attention to the careful analysis in Lord Lloyd's report, which in turn drew on the opinion, which I have already cited, of well-known academics who have studied the issue with considerable care.

Mr. Corbyn: In the intervention made by the right hon. and learned Member for Grantham—

Mr. Hogg: I am the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham.

Mr. Corbyn: I beg his pardon—the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). That is near to Grantham; we all know where it is.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did not answer the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about whether Greenpeace or animal liberation front groups could be named as terrorist organisations either by him as the current Home Secretary or by any future Home Secretary.

There is also the equally serious point that many migrant organisations that campaign actively and peacefully in this country for enormous political change in their own country are labelled as terrorist organisations by the Government of their country. I am thinking of the Governments of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, India and many other countries who have at various times named overseas political opponents as terrorist organisations. Is there a danger that the traditional right of people in exile to campaign for political change in their own country would be curtailed by their organisations being named as terrorist organisations in this country, which would bring them into the orbit of British law and prevent them from acting to achieve the political change that they desire?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend's first question was about Greenpeace and animal rights organisations. I am not a signed-up member of Greenpeace, but on its behalf I take considerable exception to it being lumped with some animal rights organisations. I answered the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. I say with considerable care that I know of no evidence whatever related to Greenpeace's activities that could bring it remotely within the Bill's ambit. I could not be clearer about that.

Proscription of organisations is dealt with in part II. If my hon. Friend reads clause 3, as I am sure he will, he will see that an organisation becomes a candidate for proscription only if it is concerned in terrorism and, under subsection (5),

"commits or participates in acts of terrorism . . . prepares for terrorism . . . promotes or encourages terrorism, or . . . is otherwise concerned in terrorism."

The power of proscription is of course an extreme power, and it has been used only in very specific circumstances in respect of Irish terrorism. My hon. Friend will be well aware that clause 5 provides that if the Secretary of State decides to proscribe an organisation, a judicial commission known as the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission will make the final decision about any proscription.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall make one more point before I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) mentioned India. That is interesting because he may have the idea that the incitement provisions in clause 57 might lead to someone being charged in this country with incitement to commit, in India, one of the serious offences laid down in the clause. That is not the case, because since the introduction by the previous Labour Government of the Suppression of Terrorism Act 1978, incitement to commit such serious crimes in India and Council of Europe countries has been

an offence. We are seeking, in a limited way, to remove certain anomalies in the criminal law, not to establish a new principle.

Mr. Hughes: As the Home Secretary knows, my colleagues and I support the end of piecemeal legislation and the introduction of UK-wide legislation. However, his definition of terrorism, which is at the heart of the Bill, goes beyond the dictionary definition, which concerns actions of a political nature, and it goes beyond the phrasing in Lord Lloyd's report, which relates to coercing Governments and, therefore, to the political process.

If we take into account clauses 1 and 38 and the incitement provisions, the Bill's definition sweeps in not only people who attack property for an environmental objective or for objectives connected with other general issues such as animal rights, but people who support organisations outside Governments in countries that are not democratic. All those people would now be included in the definition. Does the Home Secretary accept that it is a much wider definition than we have had before?

Mr. Straw: No, I do not—quite the reverse. The current definition of terrorism applies to Irish terrorism and international terrorism. I accept that the scope of the Bill is broader than that of current legislation, in that it encompasses domestic terrorism. I think that that is justified and anyone who is familiar with some of this country's not directly political, but ideological and religious groups would agree.

In Japan, a religious cult released nerve gas on the Tokyo underground: I hope nothing similar ever happens here, but, if it does, we need powers to deal with it. If the security forces were to obtain information that such an organisation was plotting such an outrage in this country, the security forces would need the powers provided in the Bill to prevent the outrage from occurring. That is the principal justification for introducing powers to arrest and detain on reasonable suspicion of involvement in acts of terrorism whose scope are wider than those covered in existing anti-terrorism legislation and in the normal criminal law, such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that the threshold in the Bill is lower than that in existing anti-terrorist legislation and that proposed in Lord Lloyd's report. The wording of existing provisions is different, talking of "violence" rather than "serious violence", so, in that respect, the threshold is raised by the Bill. The language we have used differs from Lord Lloyd's. He talks of government, but that is too specific: a terrorist act can threaten the foundations of our society without being exclusively directed against government, except when that word is understood in its broadest sense; therefore ours is a sensible and proportionate description.

I repeat that clause 1 does not create a terrorist offence. It sets out the circumstances in which terrorism takes place and defines terrorism; in turn, in limited circumstances, those provisions may trigger the use of the powers set out in the Bill. Those powers are backed by offences, but the clause does not in itself create any offences.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Many of us are concerned that the definition of terrorism has been broadened to encompass a series of offences that are currently covered by normal criminal law, and that it is hard to see how they will not fall within the new anti-terrorism law. My right hon. Friend says that there are different thresholds, but many Members of Parliament are involved in international campaigns, such as those that support, for example, the action of Kurds resisting being driven from their lands by the building of dams, the resistance of the Ogoni in Nigeria to the theft and pollution of their lands, and the resistance of the Amazon Indians to the destruction of their rain forests. All those campaigns of resistance have involved incidents of violent collision with those who would destroy people's livelihoods and lives. Despite my right hon. Friend's assurances, it is hard to see how such international campaigns, if supported by acts of solidarity within this country, will not be covered by the provisions of the Bill. Will he spell out where and why they will not be covered?

Mr. Straw: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. In general terms, people supporting one or another of the international causes he cites will not even remotely come under the Bill. It is perfectly possible that some of those who support those causes will conspire to commit, either abroad or in this country, acts that are plainly, by any definition, terrorist acts; in that case, they would come under the legislation. However, to think that the Bill will restrict the right of peaceful protest, demonstration and campaigning is wholly erroneous.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): My right hon. Friend has been generous in giving way on an important subject. My view is somewhat different from that of some of my colleagues, who are critical. I have always taken the view that Britain should not be used as a base for terrorism abroad. The use of this country for such a purpose cannot be defended or justified because of what happened previously in relation to the anti-apartheid movement, which I supported from day one and throughout my political life. Nevertheless, does my right hon. Friend accept that those of us who accept the broad thrust of the Bill have certain misgivings and feel that under a Government different from the present one civil liberties could be threatened or undermined? He has said that in combating terrorism we must take a proportional and responsible attitude and not give ammunition to the very people who, through their terrorism, also want to destroy or undermine our democracy. I hope that on Report, if not in Committee, he will be flexible in reconsidering various safeguards which would go further than the existing ones. After all, I speak as someone who supports what he is trying to do in combating terrorism.

Mr. Straw: I understand and share my hon. Friend's anxieties. I also share his view about the need for the powers that are set out in the Bill. I was about to say that we have put in place another profound safeguard against the disproportionate use of the powers that we are discussing, and that is the Human Rights Act 1998, which will come into force on 2 October 2000, before the Bill takes effect. That measure brings into our domestic law all the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights as well as specific articles, including article 5, which provides protection against arbitrary detention, and article 6, which provides the right to a fair trial.

Leaving aside whether or not successive Governments will have the same concern to balance liberty and the fight against terrorism as this Government have, the Human

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Rights Act will provide powerful control over the use of the powers that are set out in the Bill. I also say—I hope that this will be of reassurance to my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North, who was concerned, as I have been—that we took great exception in opposition to what we saw as particularly arbitrary aspects of the prevention of terrorism Acts. For example, we took exception to the use of exclusion powers, to Secretaries of State having power to authorise extensions of detention without judicial authority and to section 18 in the current Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989, which relates to tipping off.

In each instance, we have made fundamental amendments. I have not operated exclusion powers since early 1998. I am sure that they were dropped altogether under PTA renewals, and they are absent from the Bill. We have ensured in the Bill that in place of a Secretary of State having the power to authorise an extension of detention, that power will be exercised by stipendiary magistrate—district judges, as they will come to be known from April next year. We were told for years and years that that would not be possible, but the change has been made in the Bill. It is one that meets the concerns that we expressed. Section 18 offences, which have given rise to considerable anxieties, have been dropped altogether.

We have sought to act proportionately. However, I accept the need—it is the role of the House—to examine with particularly great care that which we are proposing. If there are ways in which the Bill can be improved, it is our duty to accept those suggestions.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I am worried, as are a fair number of others inside and outside the House, because it looks as though supporters of the African National Congress could come under the provisions of clause 57. If that is not my right hon. Friend's intention, will he undertake to reword the clause so that that is utterly clear?

Mr. Straw: Will my hon. Friend allow me to come to that point in a moment? I will then take further interventions. I need to make—

Mr. Corbyn: What about the point just made?

Mr. Straw: I give way to my hon. Friend, then I must make some progress.

Mr. Corbyn: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I am aware that this is the second time that I have intervened, but I have more than one objection to the Bill.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the European Court of Human Rights and the welcome passage of the Human Rights Act 1998. Is he aware that, according to a considerable body of legal opinion, the Bill goes well beyond the provisions of the human rights legislation, and any prosecutions under it would fall foul of the law already passed by the House? What advice has my right hon. Friend received?

Mr. Straw: I am not aware of that. I signed a certificate—I did not sign it blind—stating that in my view, the provisions of the Bill are compatible with convention rights. My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that far from what he says being correct, the reverse is correct: a decision by the previous Government was overturned in the Strasbourg court in 1988 in the Brogan case, which holds that executive powers in the prevention of terrorism Acts were contrary to articles 5 and 6.

As a result of that, the previous Government had to enter a derogation to the European convention, which still exists. As a result of the Bill—this is a good reason for voting for it, I say to my hon. Friend—we will be able to withdraw that derogation and bring ourselves into line with the convention rights. I was delighted, as ever, to give way to my hon. Friend. I look forward to him calling a vote, and then voting with us on the Bill.

I said before that the Bill does not create the separate offence of terrorism. When terrorists are brought to trial, they are typically prosecuted for offences in the ordinary criminal law—murder, explosives offences, conspiracy to cause explosions, unlawful possession of firearms and so on.

The main purpose of the Bill is not to extend the criminal code, but to give the police special powers to enable them to prevent and investigate that special category of crime. Those powers include an enhanced power to arrest and detain suspects, and powers to set up cordons, to stop and search vehicles and pedestrians, to investigate terrorist finances and to examine people passing through ports.

The police have no interest in using those powers in circumstances in which the normal criminal law will suffice, nor do they have the resources to do so. In 1998, only 45 people were detained in connection with terrorism, and extensions of detention were granted for just 21 of them.

I have mentioned Brogan. I shall deal now with clause 57, about which some hon. Members have expressed concern, and the new provisions on incitement and proscription.

The aim of the incitement proposals in clause 57 is to deter those who seek to use the United Kingdom as a base from which to promote terrorist acts abroad. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North some time ago, the provisions of the Bill do no more than fill gaps in the existing law. Under the Suppression of Terrorism Act 1978, which was passed by a Labour Government, the UK already has extra-territorial jurisdiction over a number of serious offences including murder, manslaughter, kidnapping, wounding with intent, and causing explosions, and incitement to any of those offences.

That extra-territorial jurisdiction covers all Council of Europe countries, including—I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), who is concerned about the Kurds—Turkey. That jurisdiction already exists. If the police and the Crown Prosecution Service had wanted to prosecute people in this country for incitement to commit various offences in Turkey, they could have done so at any time since 1978. The countries covered by the jurisdiction also include India.

Under other specific international conventions, and UK statutes bringing those into force, hostage taking and hijacking, and incitement to hostage taking and hijacking, are offences in the UK if committed in any country in the world.

The present law, I suggest to the House, is plainly anomalous. There is no obvious justification for incitement to commit murder in Turkey or India to be an offence in the UK, whereas incitement to commit murder in Japan or Australia is not an offence. The Bill seeks to put those anomalies right.

Mr. Hogg: I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but I think that this is a serious matter.

Kurdish representatives came to see the then Foreign Secretary, the then Prime Minister and me, to obtain our support for their campaign to drive Saddam Hussein and his army out of north Iraq. On the face of it, that falls within the scope of action capable of constituting terrorism under clause 1.

I understand the right hon. Gentleman to be saying not that I am wrong, but that no one would be prosecuted for encouraging the Kurds to take such action, because of the discretionary power of the prosecution authority. That, however, is a profoundly unattractive situation.

Mr. Straw: I simply do not accept the proposition. The idea that in this country the police would investigate such an alleged offence in respect of Iraq, that the Crown Prosecution Service would bring a charge and that the Director of Public Prosecutions would give his consent cannot exist outside the right hon. and learned Gentleman's fevered imagination.

Of course, we can all invent hypothetical circumstances—fantastic circumstances—in which any of us, according to the criminal code, could be charged and subject to conviction; but there is no point in our doing so. We know that, in the real world in which we live, the criminal law is subject to a significant series of checks and balances, including proper invigilation by the courts of the land and control of the Crown Prosecution Service by Members of Parliament who are answerable to the House of Commons and the other place. Such circumstances therefore do not arise, and I do not believe that they ever will.

At precisely the time when the right hon. and learned Gentleman was engaging in the discussions to which he referred, the Government of whom he was a member were supporting the Jurisdiction (Conspiracy and Incitement) Bill, introduced in 1996 by the then Member of Parliament Nigel Waterson.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): He is still a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Straw: In that case, I apologise to the House for failing to remember that he was not knocked out on 1 May 1997. We have so many absent friends now.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): It makes one weep.

Mr. Straw: Indeed it does. Anyway, I apologise abjectly for failing to remember that Eastbourne is one of the seats that we did not win.

The scope of that Bill was infinitely wider than the provisions in clause 57 of this Bill. The earlier Bill made incitement to commit an offence abroad an offence here, referring to any offence in the criminal calendar. It would certainly have caught a variety of potential offences that the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham had in mind. This Bill, however, deals with a much narrower set of offences, and is consistent with the provisions of the Suppression of Terrorism Act 1978.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I support the Bill, but the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) has raised an interesting point. It is entirely possible that diplomatic pressure could be exerted for other reasons—to do with trade, perhaps, or preparedness to support some new international treaty—for a prosecution to be brought against a group active in, say, Saudi Arabia. We might not deem that group to be violent, but those exerting the pressure might believe it to be so. Is my right hon. Friend entirely satisfied that that possibility has been taken into account?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support. I do not want to refer to Saudi Arabia specifically, but it is true that pressure was exerted on the last Government, and is exerted on the present Government from time to time, by other Governments whose history in respect of democratic and peaceful protest and representative government is not as long as ours, and who complain about the fact that people in this country are campaigning against them. As long as those people operate peacefully—and, I add parenthetically, their immigration status is satisfactory—they are fully entitled to protest. The test in a democracy is not whether one accords rights to people with whom one agrees, but to those with whom one profoundly disagrees. I defend their rights.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Does the Prime Minister agree?

Mr. Straw: Of course he does.

Dr. Godman: Sensible fellow.

Mr. Straw: As my hon. Friend says, he is a sensible fellow—I hope that my hon. Friend was referring to the Prime Minister, not to me.

Pressure will be exerted. I have had to tell some Governments—to avoid doubt, not that of Saudi Arabia—"People in this country may campaign against you, but as those people have committed no offence under the British criminal code, and their immigration status is in order, the fact that they cause you some difficulty is regrettable for you, but it is the nature of our society that we encourage dissent." If those Governments persist in their efforts, I remind them of this country's long history of encouraging dissent and that Karl Marx wrote "Das Kapital" in the basement of the British museum.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Perhaps I can be a little more precise. Let us suppose that there was a major defence contract, which was worth billions of pounds over many years, and that a Government in the middle east exerted pressure on the British Government by telling them that, if they wanted the contract, they would have to take action against a militant group, active in London in conspiring in and drawing together an international campaign. Does not my right hon. Friend foresee circumstances—not under

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a Labour Government, but under other future Governments—in which that sort of pressure could pay off?

Mr. Straw: I genuinely do not believe that that would happen. Let us assume for a moment that holders of my office, regardless of party, are completely venal and have an interest only in securing that defence contract. No member of the Government would make the decision to prosecute. First, the police would have to decide whether to investigate an alleged offence. The law guarantees the operational independence of chief officers of police. It is profoundly important under our constitution to ensure that it is not possible for the holder of a political officer, however high or mighty, to instruct a chief officer to investigate a crime because it happens to suit that person's purpose.

Secondly, clause 113 provides that,

"proceedings shall not be instituted in England and Wales"—

that also applies to Scotland and Northern Ireland—

"for an offence under any provision of this Act without the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions."

I know of no Director of Public Prosecutions or Attorney-General under any Government who would give comfort to the view that the pressures that we are discussing should influence a prosecution. Moreover, were such pressures put on paper or recorded, they would have to be disclosed to the defence, which would clearly help the defence's case.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): The anxiety of the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) is understandable because problems exist. We can be totally safeguarded against the problem only by allowing the position to continue whereby this country could become a safe haven in which terrorists operate. The challenge that the Home Secretary issued at the beginning of his speech was that if additional powers were put in place to cover a genuine problem, the safeguards must be sufficient. The integrity of Ministers is often bolstered by the knowledge of the existence of judicial review.

Mr. Straw: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those remarks and, to pick up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), we should defend to the last the right of peaceful protest and dissent in this country. At the same time, we should not provide a haven for people who are plainly committing, organising or inciting terrorist acts here or abroad.

I have witnessed only one terrorist act in this country, which was the bomb that went off at the Old Bailey in— *[Interruption.]* I have listened carefully to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham; may I be allowed to complete my sentence?

I have witnessed directly the results of a terrorist outrage only once, when a bomb went off at the Old Bailey in 1973, although other Members of the House have witnessed far more terrible events with much greater frequency. An outrageous aspect of terrorist activity is its indiscriminate nature. If people are killed or injured, the fact that the bombs, the shrapnel and the glass carry a label marked "Animal rights" or the name of some foreign country is immaterial to those who suffer. The victims of such outrages are completely innocent and I hope that the House, in ensuring that the Bill is proportionate, is able to do its job of scrutinising and improving legislation. We must also think of the possible consequences of terrorist outrages in the absence of such legislation: innocent lives might be saved if such powers were on the statute book. That is the balance that we are seeking to achieve.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: No, I want to bring my remarks to a close because I have been speaking for almost an hour.

I want to put on record the main components of the Bill about which I have not spoken. Part I contains the definition of terrorism and part II the provisions for proscription. Part III deals with terrorist property and removes the tipping-off offence. Parts IV and V introduce a range of investigative tools and other counter-terrorist powers. Part VI refers to a number of further terrorist offences, including incitement provisions. Part VII relates to temporary measures for Northern Ireland only. As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde, we are committed to removing those emergency powers in Northern Ireland as soon as it is safe to do so. In parallel with the passage of the Bill, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland intends to review the arrangements for non-jury trials. Working with interested ministerial colleagues, he will consider what potential exists for making changes at this stage and, if and when that is judged right, what steps would be necessary to achieve the Government's overall aim of a return to jury trial.

The wide-ranging and evolving threat from terrorism will not go away. The Bill therefore sets in place an appropriate and effective range of provisions, which is proportionate to the reality of the threat that we face and of practical operational benefit. It also sends a clear message to terrorists and their supporters and is consistent with the rule of law and our democratic traditions. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.28 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for setting out the details of this very necessary Bill before the House. The necessity for such a Bill is of course regrettable, but it is nevertheless fully recognised. I should therefore say at the outset that should any Member divide the House this evening, the Government will have the Opposition's full support in seeking a Second Reading for the Bill.

Conservative Members have never shirked their duty to take the toughest stand against terrorism and to give the police and the armed forces the powers that they need to protect the public. That is why, when in government, we significantly increased the powers available in the prevention of terrorism Act and the emergency provisions Act and why we had no hesitation in backing the Government when they introduced new powers in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing last year.

We have always believed that there should be a united front across all parties in the House in the fight against terrorism, from wherever that terrorism may come and whosoever perpetrates it. It demonstrates the total determination of the House that terrorism shall not

succeed and that parliamentary government throughout the United Kingdom will be vigorously defended. Whenever that bipartisan consensus breaks down, the only people who gain any succour are those who wish to subvert democracy and the rule of law for their own ends—the terrorists themselves.

Of course, bipartisanship in the House has never been and can never be about giving the Government a blank cheque to do whatever they like. Obviously, we all reserve the right to raise specific ideas where we think that the Government may be getting it wrong. Nevertheless, there is no doubt about one thing—the Opposition will always back legislation that makes life harder for those who engage in or support acts of terrorism. On that central point we believe passionately that the Government and the Opposition should stand as one.

As the Home Secretary has been discussing Damascene conversions, let me say that I wish that it had always been the case that the Government of the day had the vigorous support of the Opposition over such issues. I do not doubt that all right hon. and hon. Members abhor terrorism and I do not doubt for one moment their determination to see terrorism defeated, but the defeat of terrorism requires more than condemnation and more than just words; it requires a willingness to act.

That is why I remind the right hon. Gentleman of the actions of his party in opposition throughout many of the darkest days of terrorist violence in Northern Ireland, when Labour Members trooped into the Opposition Lobby to vote against the legislation. Year after year, increasingly lame excuses were trotted out one after another. I do not believe that we shall ever forget the sight of the Prime Minister, when he was shadow Home Secretary, the very night that IRA mortar bombs were raining down on Heathrow airport, ignoring the pleas of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and leading his colleagues into the Lobby to vote against the renewal of the prevention of terrorism Act. That was a shoddy and shameful action for the official Opposition in the House of Commons. It is not a pattern that the present Opposition intend ever to follow. It is not without a certain irony today that it falls to the party which in opposition described much of the legislation that it is now introducing as unnecessary and counterproductive finally to have the responsibility to place it permanently on the statute book.

We all agree that terrorism is evil and that those who engage in it or support it seek simply to gain through violence that which they are denied by the ballot box. We cannot allow that to happen. Democracy cannot afford to tolerate it, let alone allow it to succeed, for to do so would fatally undermine democracy itself. So we must never be prepared—nor will the Opposition ever be prepared—to compromise democracy and terror.

Here in the United Kingdom we have lived with terrorism and the threat of terrorism for some 30 years. It has been principally, though certainly not exclusively, in connection with Northern Ireland and the facts are chilling. More than 3,600 people have been killed and more than 40,000 injured either in Northern Ireland or Great Britain as a result of the violence associated with the troubles.

We have witnessed scenes of unmitigated horror and barbarism and they are all etched indelibly on our minds: La Mon house, Warrenpoint, Enniskillen, the Shankill road, Greysteel, Canary wharf and, most recently, Omagh. Those are just some of them, but there have been many more and we must never forget the suffering that our fellow citizens in Northern Ireland have had to endure. Their resilience and their fortitude, along with that shown by people throughout the entire United Kingdom, has ensured that the ballot box will always prevail over the armalite.

Nor should we forget the efforts of the police and the armed forces. I have no hesitation in commending their dedication, professionalism and sheer courage in facing the full force of the terrorist onslaught over the past 30 years. In particular, it is timely again to recall the sacrifice of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the thin green line that has literally stood between the rule of law and the descent into anarchy, and not just in Northern Ireland. As both the Metropolitan police and the Garda would be the first to acknowledge, the RUC is the first line of defence for mainland Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The RUC has paid a terrible price: 302 officers have been murdered and more than 9,000 have been maimed or injured. No police service anywhere is more deserving of our praise. Therefore, I willingly join those who have already congratulated the force on the award of the George Cross. Without the RUC, the opportunities that we see in Northern Ireland today would not exist. Everyone who cares about the rule of law owes the RUC the most profound debt of gratitude.

Conservative Members unreservedly welcome the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland, including the establishment of the Executive and the devolution of powers to the Assembly. In our view, the Belfast agreement offers the best hope for a lasting peace underpinned by stable political institutions. There is at long last the possibility that the politically motivated violence that has characterised and scarred the past 30 years might become a thing of the past. But we are also certain that, if all sides are to move forward with confidence, the Belfast agreement will have to be implemented in full. In other words, devolution must be accompanied by the decommissioning of all illegally held terrorist arms and explosives. There can be no place in government—I hope that the Home Secretary, when he is not as distracted as he has been for the past 10 minutes, will agree—for representatives of fully armed terrorist organisations that seek to cling on to their weapons of murder and mayhem.

Of course, the security situation is much improved. It is undeniable that life in Northern Ireland for many people is decidedly better and that there is a real determination that things must not go back to how they were, but we would fool ourselves if we refused to acknowledge that the peace that exists in Northern Ireland today remains very much an imperfect peace.

Terrorist organisations on both the republican and the loyalist side remain firmly intact. Their command and control structures have not been dismantled. Their capacity and capability remain undiminished. Paramilitary beatings and shootings have not ceased. As Mr. John Rowe pointed out in his most recent review of the EPA:

> "Terrorist organisations are active in the following ways: killing, maiming, beating and carrying out assaults; procuring explosives, and constructing and planting and using explosive devices; obtaining money and funds by robbery, intimidation and extortion; and lastly, fomenting disorder".

Even if the Executive succeeds, as we all must hope that it does, and the main paramilitary groups do decommission, it would still be folly to discount the

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possibility of threats from splinter groups. The history of Irish republicanism is littered with splits. The Omagh bomb, the single worst atrocity of the past 30 years, was carried out by the republican splinter group calling itself the Real IRA.

We should not underestimate the ability of any of those groups—or, indeed, the so-called loyalist groups—to destabilise Northern Ireland. For those reasons, we strongly support the inclusion of the existing powers contained in the EPA in part VII of the Bill. Equally, in recognition of the fact that we do not want those powers to be retained for longer than is necessary, we agree that they should remain temporary provisions, subject to annual renewal by Parliament.

That said, the movement in Northern Ireland is overwhelmingly in the right direction and the outlook today more positive than at any time since 1969. Like every hon. Member, we want that process to go on and to succeed, but it is not just from Irish republican, or so-called loyalist, terrorism that the United Kingdom has suffered—the threat from other forms of domestic terrorism and, indeed, from international terrorism, remains potent.

I do not wish to rehearse those threats in detail, but I refer the House to appendix F of the Lloyd report prepared by Professor Paul Wilkinson, which graphically illustrates their scope and nature. We are all mindful that next week is the 11th anniversary of the bombing of the PanAm jet over Lockerbie, which resulted in the deaths of 270 people from 21 nations. That atrocity is now the subject of proceedings under Scottish law in the Netherlands.

I come now to some of the specific provisions in the Bill. Anti-terrorist legislation was introduced to deal with specific and, it was hoped, short-term terrorist threats. The Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974—the first such measure—was passed in response to the Birmingham pub bombings of that year, and the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1973 followed the Diplock commission in Northern Ireland. Both those measures were intended to be temporary but, due to the prolonged terrorist threat, with a few significant revisions they have taken on a permanence that could not have been envisaged.

The positive developments in Northern Ireland have made it opportune to look again at that legislation, which is why the previous Government invited Lord Lloyd to do so in 1995. We agree entirely with his conclusion—which is the assumption that underpins the Government's approach—that there will remain a continuing need for counter-terrorism legislation in the foreseeable future. That being the case, we therefore also accept Lord Lloyd's opinion—which is, after all, common sense—that we should combine the existing prevention of terrorism and emergency provisions measures into one piece of permanent, UK-wide, legislation.

I listened to the earlier debate, but the Opposition can broadly accept the Bill's new definition of terrorism designed to cover the range of terrorist activity. However, we may wish to probe it a little in later stages.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to deal with the many interventions in the Home Secretary's speech that were to do with the nature of terrorism? Often, today's terrorists are tomorrow's statesmen. Various organisations were mentioned, including Greenpeace, the African National Congress and even the Palestine Liberation Organisation. However, is not it impossible for the Government to include in the Bill an exact definition of terrorism that will cover all situations? Must we not allow the Home Office some latitude for good sense?

Miss Widdecombe: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He is right that terrorism cannot be defined either out of existence or so closely as to cover every eventuality—

Mr. Hogg: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Miss Widdecombe: If my right hon. and learned Friend will allow me to complete my sentence, I shall certainly give way to him. I agree with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), and that is why I said that the Opposition broadly accept the new definition. In response to the point that I suspect my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) is about to make, I confirm that we shall nevertheless wish to probe that definition a little later in the Bill's progress through the House.

Mr. Hogg: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. I am perfectly prepared to accept that, generally speaking, the Home Office will approach the matter with good sense. However, I hope that my right hon. Friend will appreciate that rights of third parties are also involved. For example, there is the question of raising money for organisations capable of falling within the class of those carrying on acts of terrorism as defined in clause 1. To raise money for that purpose is an offence, and banks and accountants are under a duty to disclose the cash transactions arising from such dealings. To define such activities broadly under clause 1, so that serious injury to property becomes part of the definition, is to court a very serious problem indeed.

Miss Widdecombe: I have to say to my right hon. and learned Friend that funding terrorist activities should attract the same definition and penalties as perpetrating them. However, I take the point that there is room for further exploration of the definition that we broadly accept but which we are happy to have debated and refined.

In this context, I note that the Government have inserted the word "serious" before "violence" in the new definition. We hope that that will not be used by some in Northern Ireland to distinguish between so-called punishment attacks—what has been described as internal housekeeping—and wider attacks on the community or security forces. It is our view that they are all acts of terrorism. Even if it were only by a nod, I would have appreciated the Home Secretary signalling that the word "serious" was not to be used to excuse paramilitary or punishment beatings.

Mr. Straw: We have included the word "serious" in the definition not for any of the reasons suggested by the

right hon. Lady, but because that was one of the recommendations of Lord Lloyd's report, which states:

"The existing definition . . . 'the use of violence for political ends . . . & could be retained, subject to the addition of the word 'serious' before 'violence'."

In a separate section, the report talks about using an FBI definition which uses the phrase "serious violence".

Miss Widdecombe: I was not suggesting for one moment that the Home Secretary had that distinction in mind. I was asking him whether that definition of "serious" could be used in such a way as to preclude punishment beatings from being caught by the legislation. It is a straightforward question.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady has accepted that it is difficult to be precise about the circumstances. However, if a paramilitary organisation operating in Northern Ireland fits the definition—whether it uses paramilitary beatings or not—it will come within the definition. It is straightforward.

Miss Widdecombe: I am grateful for that assurance, although we may return to precisely what we are driving at later.

We agree with the Government that the time has come to remove exclusion orders. They have outlived their practical usefulness and we are not sorry to see them go. We are satisfied that the wider power to exclude or deport is maintained in the Immigration Act 1971.

We support the inclusion of the separate Northern Ireland provisions in the Bill. We would all like to see a move away from Diplock courts in Northern Ireland back to normal jury trials. Diplock courts are a wholly exceptional arrangement, but the circumstances that gave rise to them remain. Therefore, they are essential to the operation of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. We welcome also the fact that the Government have maintained their U-turn from when they were in opposition and retained the system of certifying out offences, rather than adopting a system of certifying in. We believe the current system to be the right one.

Having agreed with all that, we are not without some concerns about some aspects of the Bill. One of the advantages of the existing prevention of terrorism and emergency provisions legislation being renewed annually is that it has allowed Parliament to scrutinise the exceptional powers contained in that legislation. In addition, the Government and Parliament have benefited enormously from the annual reviews of the legislation. I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to Mr. John Rowe and his predecessors in this respect.

As it stands, the Bill offers no mechanism for Parliament to scrutinise the powers that it contains. That is regrettable. We believe that they should be re-examined by Parliament at frequent intervals. We would expect them to be reviewed by an independent expert, such as Mr. Rowe, and to have his report presented to Parliament. We believe that this is an area where accountability to Parliament is essential.

The Bill proposes to take away the power to approve an application to extend the length of time that a suspect can be held in detention without charge from the Home Secretary or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and give it to a judicial authority. The Home Secretary made great play of that as a virtue. We remain unconvinced that it is legitimately a judicial function, rather than an Executive one. The decision to extend detention under existing legislation is usually based on intelligence material in the hands of the Executive that cannot be considered appropriate for judicial consideration. The information is often of such a sensitive nature that it cannot be disclosed to a detainee or his legal adviser without compromising the source of the intelligence, thus endangering lives or impeding an investigation.

By giving that power to a judicial authority, the judiciary would inevitably be seen as part of the investigation and prosecution process, which could bring its independence into question. The problems associated with that seem to be particularly acute in Northern Ireland, where all scheduled offences are tried under the Diplock system—save those that are certified out by the Attorney-General—with a single judge acting as both judge and jury.

The Home Secretary will be aware that the judiciary in Northern Ireland has always been opposed to taking on such a function. Even if the right hon. Gentleman were to press ahead with this, he would have to overcome the serious practical problem of finding sufficient people in Northern Ireland, which has a small judiciary, willing to serve in such a capacity.

Doubtless the Home Secretary will justify this move by claiming that the present system is vulnerable to challenge in the European Court. Yet not only has the United Kingdom successfully applied a derogation in respect of article 5(3) of the convention since the Brogan case in 1988, the validity of that derogation was upheld in 1993. The Government could continue to apply that derogation but for the fact that under the Human Rights Act 1998 it will expire anyway in 2005. But that was a matter of policy rather than legal necessity, and we urge the Government to think again.

We strongly support some aspects of the Bill. We support the new powers to enable the seizure and detention of terrorist cash at borders, and its subsequent forfeiture, as advocated by Lord Lloyd. We also support extending the offence of directing a terrorist organisation from Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom.

In general, we support most of the Bill, but we have serious reservations about the transfer of detention from the Executive to the judiciary. We have some concerns, which have been expressed on both sides of the House, about the adequacy of the definition, although we broadly support it. We are glad that the legislation is being made permanent and that the two Acts are being brought together. We will support the Government in the Lobby, should there be any who press this matter to a Division.

4.52 pm

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on his speech and on his willingness to accept so many interventions. The good humour with which he accepted those interventions showed a degree of rationality that I cannot hope to emulate.

There are some improvements in the Bill, based on the White Paper. The creation of the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission goes some way to meeting some of the problems raised by proscription. The main problem in that connection, which will have to be debated in

[Mr. Kevin McNamara]

Committee, is that judicial review deals only with the legality of cases, not their merit. I shall be discussing that later.

I also welcome the decision to have judicial intervention in cases of detention. We campaigned for that for a long time when we were in opposition, and my right hon. Friend is to be congratulated on introducing it. I also welcome the fact that one of our first actions was to get rid of executive detention, which was a polite name for internment without trial. That was one of our undertakings, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend on that achievement.

I welcome in particular the decision on exclusion orders and internal exile. Our late colleague, Roger Stott, would have welcomed that decision because, as my right hon. Friend knows, he campaigned long and hard for the withdrawal of that provision.

On the basis of what is happening in Northern Ireland, I welcome the closure of the Castlereagh detention centre. It has had an unhappy history, with members of both communities suffering torture and beatings there. I look forward to the time when the interrogation centres at Gough barracks and at Strand road police station are closed and when everyone charged with a criminal offence in Northern Ireland is charged under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, not other regulations.

I welcome much in the Bill, and much that is being dropped. However, I read the Bill in some sorrow and some anger. We appear to have lost a wonderful opportunity to have got rid of a lot of the litter and debris of the past 30 years in Northern Ireland. We could have done without part VII, an opinion shared by the Human Rights Commissioner in Northern Ireland, Professor Brice Dickson. It is particularly sad that we are keeping those provisions because the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974 was something of a cosmetic version of the old Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act (Northern Ireland) 1922.

Throughout the existence of Northern Ireland, some special powers have existed. During the first world war, there was the Defence of the Realm Act 1914. After that came the Restoration of Order in Ireland Regulations 1918, then the 1922 Act and the 1974 Act. The whole history of Ireland since the Union with Ireland Act 1800 has been a history of Acts of coercion. Only in Northern Ireland have such Acts been in continuous operation for more than 70 years.

Members who were not here in 1974 will not recall the atmosphere when the PTA was introduced. I should like to remind hon. Members, particularly my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, of the situation at that time. There had been an appalling atrocity in Birmingham. It was felt that something had to be done. There was a popular clamour for action. Several arguments were advanced. First, the Government had to be seen to act decisively. Secondly, it was suggested that action was necessary to defend the Irish population in the country, who were being threatened at work, physically abused, having their homes stoned and windows broken and who faced all manner of intimidation and harassment.

It was felt that the PTA would be helpful, and we were given guarantees that it would exist for only six months. As I said earlier, there was also whispering in the Corridors that if we did not introduce the Act, and quickly, we might face the reintroduction of capital punishment. That was the atmosphere of panic, fear and intimidation that then existed as we floundered around wondering what could be done. A Bill already drafted was taken from its pigeonhole and introduced.

In fact, the temporary Bill has lasted until now, and it will continue in force for the foreseeable future. It is ironic that a Bill introduced to protect the Irish in this country has been used for their intimidation and harassment. There have been many arrests, but few prosecutions and even fewer convictions. It has been used to harry and hinder law-abiding people, both immediate immigrants and people of the second or third generation. A sense of purpose was lost. Far from giving encouragement, succour and security, the measure became one of the most hated pieces of legislation in this country. We are now being asked to maintain it.

There is always a danger that, in any legal system, there could be two parallel sources, where the same set of facts could result in the employment of two different systems of justice—the only difference would be motivation. If one is caught up under the provisions of the PTA or the EPA, one's legal rights would be far less than if one were detained for what we might describe as an ordinary, decent crime. That cannot be a proper way of dealing with the problem. It is surely not a measure that we should want to have and to hold.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: I realise that other hon. Members have given way to me, but, with the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, I gave a specific undertaking to the Chair that I would not take up too much time. I should be more than willing to cross swords with the hon. Gentleman in Committee—indeed, I shall be more than delighted to do so.

Mr. Maginnis: The hon. Gentleman is frit as usual.

Mr. McNamara: The hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I point out to the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) that the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) is perfectly within his rights not to accept an intervention. Comments such as those made by the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone from a sedentary position are not really in the spirit of the House.

Mr. Maginnis: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for having spoken from a sedentary position. However, it is well known that the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) pursues a tedious path in his interpretation—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is compounding his offence.

Mr. McNamara: If the Chair will allow me to forego my promise, I shall willingly give way to the hon. Gentleman, but having given that undertaking, I felt that I should honour it.

Mr. Maginnis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He pursues his usual tedious and predictable

path through the measure. He always talks as though successive Governments have deliberately discriminated against Irish people. It appears that he has no understanding of the terror of the 3,500 people killed or 300 policemen injured. Would the hon. Gentleman balance the remarks in the remainder of his contribution so that we can hear the matter put properly in context?

Mr. McNamara: I do not need lectures from the hon. Gentleman on how hard the deaths in Northern Ireland have hit home—I have had personal experience. However, I am concerned that we should have a proper system and a proper understanding of the rule of law. The effect of the legislation, especially in the 1970s and the early 1980s, was to alienate a whole community. That is not a good thing.

We have already discussed the definition of terrorism, so I shall not pursue the points that I had planned to make on that subject. It will be interesting to hear what comes up in Committee on that matter.

On the front of the Bill, there is a statement by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that the Bill does not offend against the European convention on human rights. That is not the opinion of the Human Rights Commission in Northern Ireland. At the drop of a hat, the commission found six cases under the EPA provisions. Section 13, on the onus of proof on possession of proscribed articles, is incompatible with the presumption of innocence in article 6 of the convention. Section 20, on the power to enter and search premises without a warrant, is incompatible with the right to respect for private life in article 8.

Section 25, on the power to stop and question, is incompatible with the right to liberty in article 5(1)(b). Section 30(A), on onus of proof on possession of certain documents, is incompatible with the right to a fair trial in article 6. Section 30A(2), on the evidence of a police officer—that is the stupid legislation that we pushed through after Omagh, in another fit of panic—is incompatible with the right to a fair trial in article 6(3)(d). Section 30A(4), on inferences from silence in respect of membership charges, is incompatible with the right to a fair trial in article 6(1).

In the prevention of terrorism provisions contained in the new Bill, the Human Rights Commission identified 10 matters that were incompatible with the European convention. Clause 3, on proscription, might be incompatible with article 11 of the convention, which provides for a right of peaceful assembly. Under clause 5 and schedule 3, on the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission, judicial review is the first test for appeal. However, following the "gays in the military" case, the European Court said that a judicial review in itself was not sufficient, and that we could go to the merits of the case.

Clause 18, on the duty to disclose information with reversal of the burden of proof, contravenes article 10—the right to freedom of expression. It also limits press freedom to collect information and relates to sorry circumstances such as the Stephens inquiry's pursuit of Ed Malone of the *Sunday Tribune* recently. Clause 37, on the tipping-off offence, again reverses the onus. It possibly stifles criticism of the police or security services, and therefore contravenes article 10 of the convention, on freedom of speech.

Clauses 38 and 39, on powers of arrest, may well contravene article 5(1)(c), which lists the grounds of arrest. It must be remembered that previous Home Secretaries have justified that power, not to gain convictions but for fishing expeditions to gain evidence—arresting people not to prosecute them, not even because they were thinking about it, but to try, by questioning, to get information. That was justified by the then Home Secretary, the former European Commissioner Mr. Leon Brittan.

We then come to schedule 13, paragraphs 2 and 6, on the right of access to lawyers, which can be delayed for up to 48 hours. That contravenes article 6 of the convention. Clause 39 and schedule 7, on the detention of an individual for up to 48 hours, similarly contravenes the convention.

Clause 42 gives a policeman the power to stop and search anyone that he reasonably believes to be a terrorist. That creates all sorts of problems on the basis of the new, wider definition of terrorism that appears in clause 1. The Bill will leave itself wide open to challenge because a case relating to the narrow, secure and specific definition would be easier to defend before the European Court than would a case that is so broad and so wide in what is being averred.

Clauses 55 and 56 would make it an offence to possess items that give rise to a reasonable suspicion that they are being used for terrorist purposes. Again the onus of proof has been reversed, breaching article 6(2)—the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. Interestingly, in the Stobie case, when Mr. Stobie was charged with the possession of guns and ammunition and had to prove his innocence under the existing legislation, the Director of Public Prosecutions dropped the case in the absence of any proof. That was a remarkable decision by the DPP. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary should have borne that in mind when he was giving his paean to some public officers in the Stobie case.

Finally, the Bill would make it an offence to possess information that is likely to be useful to terrorists, and article 10 of the European convention provides a right to receive and impart information without interference from a public body—even if the ideas "shock or disturb" the state.

I welcomed the incorporation of the convention into our legislation. I believe that it was an important step forward, but I believe that the Home Secretary is being over-optimistic in his statement on the face of the Bill that the provisions of the Bill are compatible with the convention rights.

Fortunately for the House, however, such matters will be decided not by the Executive any more but in the courts. We all admire my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's learning, but not only our courts but the court in Strasbourg may decide that the advice that he has received is not well founded. Incorporating the European convention on human rights into our legislation was a courageous act by the Government, and I support them in that. However, the convention is very much a two-edged sword and the Government may find to their cost—I happily say "to their cost"—that they have been given bad advice on this matter. I imagine that many of the issues that I have mentioned will be dealt with in the courts. The court in Strasbourg considers cases in detail and takes them one by one. The blanket approach, as suggested by the Bill, will not apply.

I have pointed out that the courts will be the final arbiters, but I return to the start of my speech. I welcome the way in which my right hon. Friend the Home

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Secretary has approached the matter. In particular, I welcome a statement that he slipped in towards the end of his speech. He said that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will set up a committee to see how we can return to jury trials in Northern Ireland. That was a most important statement. However, the return to jury trials can be introduced quite easily. Instead of contracting out cases from scheduled offences, they should be contracted in. The Director of Public Prosecutions, the Attorney-General and others argue that doing that would be to take over a role that should be carried out by Parliament. However, contracting something out to have a jury trial also means taking over the role of Parliament.

Given the current background with the considerable lessening in the number of terrorist offences and the considerable lowering of tensions, we should do everything that we can to encourage a return to jury trials. Contracting in of scheduled offences is the best and easiest way to do that. At present, the authorities say that all scheduled offences are terrorist offences unless we contract them out. Why cannot they say that all offences are honest, decent, criminal offences—if there is such a thing—and those that we suspect of being terrorist offences will be contracted in?

5.12 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I support the Second Reading of the Bill and I welcome the fact that there will be a permanent Terrorism Act on the statute book. I was struck by references to the origins of previous prevention of terrorism measures, which tended to be in response to outrages. Reference has been made to Birmingham and to Omagh—and I introduced certain measures in the House in response to an outrage at Ballygawley. One of the measures that we introduced at that time was the right, in certain circumstances, to draw inferences from a suspect's determination to remain silent. For that, I was heavily attacked by Labour Members when they were in opposition, but they moved that principle a bit further in the measures that they introduced in response to Omagh. I do not criticise them for that.

The contribution of the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) is living proof of how far the Labour party, which is now in government, has moved. The hon. Gentleman was once the Opposition spokesman whom I had to face across the House. He sang a very different song at that time and spoke on behalf of his party when he did so. I doubt whether the Labour party would now subscribe to many of the views that the hon. Gentleman expressed at that time.

I declare an interest: I am the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. In our most recent report, we drew attention to the fact that terrorism is not confined to Northern Ireland and that it will not be happily dealt with by the Good Friday agreement and what has flowed from it. Terrorism is now a global activity which poses many fresh and serious challenges. Terrorism has long existed around the world in domestic situations, but it is now conducted against one country from another. The latter is often a safe haven that offers peace and tranquillity for planning, organising and fundraising for some of the outrages that are perpetrated in another country.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the right hon. Gentleman concede that there are fundamental problems with the argument that he is propounding? During the apartheid era in South Africa, it was held that Umkhonto we Sizwe was operating a terrorist regime against the Pretoria Government. The organisation had strong supporters and friends in this country. My understanding is that, under this Bill, the ANC office in London would have been closed down on that basis, and the ANC banned in Britain as a terrorist organisation.

Mr. King: I shall develop that serious point because it needs to be addressed, but I want first to set the scene.

There is globalisation of terrorism, facility of movement of funds and equipment, which is almost unpreventable, and the horrific development of technology. The Home Secretary referred to the use of sarin on the underground in Tokyo. Weapons of mass destruction—whether they be nuclear, chemical or biological—have developed to the extent that they offer new possibilities for terrorism, often as much by the threat of their use as by their actual use. Against that background any democratic state must have in place arrangements and facilities to deal with those situations.

Having had to take some responsibility for these matters in the past, I share the Home Secretary's view that no Government could face their people if they had not taken responsible action to ensure that measures were in place. I recognise not only how quickly public opinion can change and public comment can focus on safeguards and the need always to protect legitimate interests, but how ferocious will be the counter-attack if the Government are seen to have left their people exposed to unacceptable threats and dangers, and not to have taken reasonable and responsible action to protect them. I include that new dimension of terrorism, to which my committee referred in its report, in my consideration of the Bill.

The issue that the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) just raised is precisely the point that I made to the Home Secretary. We are seeking to ensure that we do not allow this country to become a safe haven for those who commit against perfectly democratic countries terrorism of a kind that we would find totally unacceptable. Those countries may be other members of the European Union. It is no secret that because of the outrages that have been committed in Paris, the French Government are extremely critical of us for what they see as providing a haven for Islamic terrorists. I do not imagine that any hon. Member would seek to defend the position of this country being a safe haven for terrorism against legitimate, democratic Governments.

We then come up against exactly the problem that the hon. Member for Islington, North mentioned: one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. I intervened on the Home Secretary to make the point about balance, which is one of the principles by which he will determine his actions.

We are talking, without question, about additional powers, not the normal criminal law. With additional powers must come additional safeguards. I shall not try to

pronounce in detail what I think the answer should be. The merit of the Committee scrutiny of the Bill is that those issues, which need to be recognised, can be dealt with.

I shivered momentarily when my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) was speaking. I went into northern Iraq to support the Kurds there, supported by 45 Commando and a squadron of Tornados. We were attempting to ensure that the Kurds were protected: we encouraged them to take the most violent action to repel any aggression against them by Saddam Hussein and his forces and we provided back-up in the form of air power and a Marine commando. It is an extreme illustration, but I am sure that lawyers would have a field day with such admissions if I were liable to arrest for aiding and abetting a terrorist act against the legitimate Government of another country. I hope that the Serjeant at Arms does not feel the need to make a citizen's arrest for what might be claimed to be a manifest breach of proposed legislation.

The serious point is that there must be proper safeguards and thorough analysis of what constitutes terrorism. In a private Member's Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson)—who, despite what the Home Secretary thinks, is alive and well and still a Member of Parliament—tried to ensure that, to be considered a terrorist act, an act should be legally defined as a terrorist act both in this country and in the country in which the complaint originated. The complexity of that description demonstrates the difficulties that Ministers encounter when trying to strike a balance between obvious acts of terrorism committed against a friendly country, and action that is less easily recognised as terrorism because it takes the form of an act of protest against a regime that we regard as unacceptable and our sympathies reside with the protesters. How that balance is struck will be the business of the Committee on the Bill. I am not able to serve on the Committee, so I look forward to Report to discover how the Committee resolves that important issue. I approve of the Bill in general and believe that the Committee will be able to deal with detailed problems.

I am not sure that I can fully support what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said about judicial approval of an extension order. I used to have to extend orders in respect of people who were held in detention before charges were preferred—indeed, I might have been the Secretary of State who was pilloried in the European Court in Strasbourg after lawyers contended that my giving an extension of seven days before charges needed to be brought was absolutely disgraceful. Therefore, I took an interest in events that occurred at the same time as that case was going on.

The case coincided with the successful apprehension by the French authorities of a ship called the Eksund, which was loaded with arms and munitions from Libya intended for the IRA. The French arrested the captain and crew and the examining magistrate took charge of proceedings. Around the time that the UK was being criticised for holding a person for seven days before charge on the authority of a Secretary of State, the examining magistrate under French judicial proceedings had the crew of the Eksund held for two years before preferring charges. As I understand it, the examining magistrate granted himself the extension while he assembled the prosecution case.

It is difficult for our European friends, who operate a completely different system of legal procedures, to believe that it might be right for a politician to make out extension orders. Against that background, I think that the judicial approach is certainly worthy of consideration. I recognise the criticism that can be made of political power being used in this way and the feeling that it could be used improperly. That is something that the Committee might like to examine.

I warmly support all the references to fundraising in the Bill. I realised too late in my time in Northern Ireland that one of the key elements was to try to get after the funds of the terrorist organisations. That was in addition to trying to stop violence on the streets and prevent terrorist outrages. I set up the anti-rackets unit to try to pursue those funds.

I remember well—some right hon. and hon. Members may also recall this—an incident when certain people were charged with conspiracy to murder in this country. They were apprehended with some of their equipment in a campsite in Somerset. I recall that they had £4,000 stitched into the wall of their tent. A certain learned and reverend gentleman in Northern Ireland had great doubts about British police arresting decent young Irishmen who were obviously genuine holidaymakers. He thought that they should not have been apprehended in the way that they were. It was the discovery of the money that made him realise that the people concerned were not ordinary tourists or students on vacation. That is a reminder that money is a key ingredient in the obtaining of weapons, transport, the buying of vehicles and the entire paraphernalia on which terrorism depends.

Mr. McNamara: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. King: I shall finish my point.

Anyone who knows Northern Ireland will be familiar with the incredible infrastructure of black taxis, protection rackets, smuggling and one-armed bandit rigging. The entire operation is backed up in that way. The IRA and other terrorist organisations, including the UVF in its time, saw that funds were an essential element in their activities.

Mr. McNamara: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. King: I shall not give way. I shall be brief.

I look forward with interest to the outcome of the Committee stage. I strongly support both the provisions that deal with money, fundraising and money laundering, and the Bill in general,

Mr. McNamara: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to interrupt the debate. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) referred to a case in which it was partially because of statements that he had made in the House that the Court of Appeal overthrew the conviction of those involved. It should be put on the record that those people are innocent as far as the law of this land is concerned.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is sufficiently experienced in the House to know that that is

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

not a point of order on which the occupant of the Chair can rule. It is a matter of debate. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) felt unable to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. King: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. For the record, I said "for which people were charged".

5.28 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I asked earlier to be allowed to speak in the debate, but, owing to a terrible cold, I had not prepared myself. That is why I looked slightly taken aback when you called me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Forgive me.

I do not join in right hon. and hon. Members' welcome for the introduction of permanent prevention of terrorism legislation, because it suggests that, in a way, the terrorists have won. I accept that there have been circumstances in which it has been necessary to suspend the protection of human rights, as guaranteed in international legislation and in other ways, effectively to investigate and prosecute activities conducted by terrorist organisations. In a way, they want that to happen, and that is part of the problem.

The best form of prosecution and prevention is through the robust mechanisms of the usual laws to prevent the activities of such organisations. Then, there is no risk of their being able to portray the state as oppressive and as suspending their human rights, and themselves as victims of an oppressive state.

Unlike many hon. Members, therefore, I am disappointed that we have had to take permanent legislative powers to deal with the matter. One of the important reasons why there has not been more careless use of the temporary legislation that we have had hitherto is that it is regularly renewed and regularly debated by the House. I welcomed the request from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) that the reports by Mr. Rowe QC should be continued if we have permanent legislation. I would welcome a commitment from my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to the continuation of that reporting mechanism.

We must be sensitive to the degrees of suspension of human rights incorporated in the Bill's provisions. I cannot believe that it was not without careful reflection that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State signed the undertaking, under section 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998, which appears on the front of the Bill. I suspect that he may have given the British courts some interesting challenges in the future in carrying out their duty to read the Bill, if it survives in its present form, in a way that conforms with that Act.

I have a particular concern about clause 18, which imposes a duty to report suspicions. For example, journalists may be reluctant to investigate issues relating to terrorism because the Bill places on them the onus to report matters that are only suspicions. I am deeply worried about how that might be interpreted in future.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Lady is entirely right, and her point applies to banks and accountants, too. If they have reason to suppose that an organisation might fall within the organisations that are conducting terrorism as defined by clause 1, they are under a duty to report. They might conclude that they should make a report on any organisation that advocated violence against property—for example, Greenpeace.

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed. We know from recent activities—for example, the campaigning against the Seattle round, and Stop the City—that there are organisations that have within their sphere of influence and activity people who are certainly democrats, with legitimate aspirations to influence policy, as well as people who are not. It is in respect of such groups that the danger of the legislation biting wrongly and seriously interfering with fundamental human rights and liberties becomes most serious.

The Home Secretary showed us, in a certain piece of legislation, what I consider to be the best way of dealing with terrorism. I refer to the legislation that he introduced to ensure that the sentences of those who were prosecuted for offences could be increased when a racial motive was involved. It is right for such people to be subject to heavier sentences, because of the terrorising effect of racism on black and other ethnic minority communities. I feel that, in many instances, the legislative response to terrorism is enforced most effectively at the point of sentencing when the fact that the impact of the terror extends to more people than the victim is significant, and must be taken into account.

Mr. Hogg: That is an ingenious argument, but it comes up against the problem that the most serious offence is murder, which incurs a mandatory life sentence. It is not possible to impose a heavier sentence than that.

Fiona Mactaggart: That is true; but I believe that, if part of the Bill's aim is to prevent terrorism as well as detecting it, we must understand the way in which the politics of terror operate. Part of that operation is the terrorising of communities, the limiting of their capacity for action, and making people believe that the democratic route to solving problems is not a route that will work. Many terrorists—individuals and organisations—are pleased when the state takes steps to restrain and restrict them which have the effect of restraining and restricting, for example, peaceful assembly, because that rewards terrorists. It is a tempting option for a state, especially as many terrorists do not care about the consequences of their actions, and do devastating things such as blowing up themselves as well as others.

That is why I see merit in temporary rather than permanent legislation. There are times—many of us have lived through them in this country—when the impact of terrorist activity is so significant that people's conduct of their daily business is restricted. When terror already exists in the community, the use of police cordoning powers and wider investigative powers is entirely appropriate. We should not forget, however, that the use of such powers is itself terrorising in a sense.

Mr. Maginnis: Nonsense.

Fiona Mactaggart: I am not saying that it is deliberately terrorising, but it is terrorising in a sense. I remember the terror that I felt when I went into the City and saw police officers wearing flak jackets and carrying machine guns. I was frightened, and I think that many

others were as well. Although such a response is sometimes necessary to deal with the activities of terrorists, it must be proportionate: it must never become the normal run of things. If it does, that will be a victory for the terrorists.

As I have said, I see merit in temporary provisions. There is merit in, for example, the response of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to the White Paper. The commission suggested that there should be staged measures: it suggested, for instance, that powers should exist in the first place to deal with money laundering involving proscribed organisations, but that other powers should be triggered by the degree of terror. We should reflect on whether all the powers in the Bill need to be permanent.

The most difficult task of any politician is to defend the civil rights of a terrorist, because terrorists have no interest in the civil rights of the rest of humanity. However, we should ensure that their civil rights are protected because that is the best way in which to reduce their support, and, if we can catch them while protecting their human and civil rights, we can create a society in which politics flourishes and terror does not.

5.41 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), not least to congratulate her on speaking from a background of adversity. I welcome the main thrust of her speech, which was an argument against permanent legislation.

When I took up my new responsibility of looking after home affairs for my party, one of my first tasks was to consider the sort of legislation that my party believed should be on the statute book. That task was, effectively, to devise the home affairs part of an alternative Queen's Speech. Like the Government, we drew up a long list. One of the measures that I proposed and which my colleagues accepted was one on counter-terrorism.

We believe that we should codify and simplify existing exceptional legislation on terrorism, repeal unnecessary measures, especially the sort of legislation that we passed last year in haste, and ensure regular scrutiny of counter-terrorist legislation on a United Kingdom-wide basis. We approach the debate from that perspective. We support a United Kingdom-wide Bill. We also support reconsidering a series of existing temporary measures and bringing them together. However, we have fundamental anxieties about the Government's conclusion to that process.

Although we will vote for Second Reading of the Bill, we have tabled a motion that would provide for a Special Standing Committee to consider it. In such a Committee, Members of Parliament can take evidence before examining the Bill line by line. We believe that exceptional measures require exceptional scrutiny. The fact that a consultation process has occurred is not a sufficient defence for rejecting the motion. In the previous Session, a Special Standing Committee considered the Immigration and Asylum Bill, which deals with exceptional problems. I hope that colleagues from other parties will join us in trying to persuade the Government that a Special Standing Committee should consider the measure.

My approach to the Bill is based on a variety of reflections. I have a background as a lawyer and I have worked in the Council of Europe, dealing with appeals against the United Kingdom Government from individuals who complained of violations of human rights under the emergency legislation. I went to school with people who went on to serve in Northern Ireland and were badly injured—including some who were unable to work properly again. My brother served in Northern Ireland, including in Omagh. I represent a constituency in the London docklands where people were killed by terrorists. I am also the Member of Parliament who represents Liberty—formerly the National Council for Civil Liberties—which has always been vigilant in ensuring that we carefully protect the liberties of our citizens and never overreact. Like others, I have been a member of the anti-apartheid movement. I was conscious that we were supporting people who were out of power, some of whom had engaged in terrorist activities as they were then defined, but I was none the less willing to support them at the time.

I come to the debate conscious that we still have no written constitution, although grateful that the Government have legislated for the European convention on human rights to become part of domestic law, as it will in October next year. I also remember how we have so often reacted to events, as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) reminded us. Last September's recall of Parliament, which was a reaction to the Omagh bombing, provided the latest bad legislative example: we acted in haste and, as a result, introduced legislation that we are not only returning to, but which was clearly seen to be defective at the time. Parliament was recalled for two days of business during the recess and against the background of a threatened guillotine motion, so it was always unlikely that we would get the legislation right.

The point made by the hon. Member for Slough has more importance, not only because it is theoretically right, but because the experience of the House is that we must ensure that we are able to look at legislation again. I say to colleagues that we must not put on the statute book exceptional measures with no mechanism for Parliament to reconsider them. My hon. Friends and I will argue that there should be not only special examination of the Bill in Committee, but a provision whereby the legislation would lapse once a Parliament to allow us to review, re-enact or amend it.

In an article in today's edition of *The Guardian*, the Home Secretary says that terrorism changes readily, often and quickly, which is why we need to be able to respond periodically and why we should not assume that, once we have legislated today, that will do for all our tomorrows. That well-worn saying, "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance" applies particularly to such Bills as this one, and in our view we must not just do our business and pass the legislation, thinking that that will suffice. As a postscript, I should add that once a Parliament would normally be the right frequency for a substantive reconsideration of the legislation, but we also ask for the annual report procedures—which have been used recently for temporary provisions—to be implemented so that a report can be made to the House on the workings of what are exceptional provisions in law.

Mr. McNamara: Has the hon. Gentleman considered that it might be better to provide for the report to go to

[Mr. McNamara]

the Home Affairs Committee? That would allow for better in-depth examination of the issues than might be achieved in an hour and a half debate after 10 o'clock at night.

Mr. Hughes: I am always of the view that reports should go first to the relevant Select Committee and that the House should then consider matters after colleagues in those Committees have had more time to look at the details. I support that argument, but the Bill should certainly come back to Parliament for consideration regularly because we may want to amend it. As the hon. Member for Slough said, it is also better to know that the legislation will return to the House for review because that provides a useful check against misuse of legislative powers that we would otherwise have no means to change through Parliament without a Government's assent.

We welcome some measures in the Bill, such as the repeal of the exclusion order provisions. Although my party sometimes did otherwise, I never voted for them and I always considered that they were wrong. Ours is one country or it is not, and excluding people from one part of Britain from another part of it always struck me as fundamentally wrong. I know that colleagues on the Ulster Unionist Benches and others took that view. We made a terrible mistake by going down that road and I am glad that it is being put right, albeit belatedly.

We share the Government's view—it was supported in measured terms by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater—that special powers should no longer be subject to ministerial review but to judicial review. There are exceptional circumstances in Northern Ireland and differences that I entirely understand, but in general terms special powers should be subject to independent review which is not conducted by the Executive.

We entirely agree that there should be a less piecemeal approach, that UK legislation should be considered as a whole and that everything that is defined as terrorism should be dealt with at the same time and not in different legislation.

The Bill includes specific provisions for Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) has left the Chamber briefly to attend the Welsh Grand Committee, but he may say a word or two about that. We support the proposal that there should be a temporary continuation of additional special powers in Northern Ireland, ideally with the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the confidence of the community in Northern Ireland as political and other normality returns. I hope to visit Northern Ireland to talk to representatives of all parties to reassure myself that the progression from unusual provisions such as the Diplock courts to normality is made with the maximum consensus. Five years seems to be the right time scale for such changes to be made; if that can be achieved more quickly that is welcome, nevertheless the provision in the Bill is the right one.

We see the Government's proposal that the Northern Ireland powers should lapse after five years as an argument in favour of our suggestion that there should be a general five-year review. The Government accept that certain powers should continue for a temporary period. We consider that that condition should apply to all powers and that they all should be subject to regular review.

The debate has already highlighted several key issues, the most important of which is the definition of terrorism. It is true, as the Home Secretary rightly said, that the Bill does not create a new offence of terrorism. Clauses 1 and 38 define certain activities as terrorist activities which require special responses from the state.

It is absolutely clear, however, that the Bill changes the definition of terrorism as understood by the man or woman in the street. The New Oxford Dictionary definition is probably the one that they would understand. It defines terrorism as

"the use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims."

Previous legislation has defined terrorism in different ways. Both the substantive Acts that are repealed by the Bill include the same phraseology. I repeat it because it is important to recognise that we are moving a long way from the present legislation. According to the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 and the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1998, terrorism:

"Means the use of violence for political ends, and includes any use of violence for the purpose of putting the public, or any section of the public in fear."

The Reinsurance (Acts of Terrorism) Act 1993 describes terrorism as follows:

"Acts of persons acting on behalf of, or in connection with, any organisation which carries out activities directed towards the overthrowing or influencing, by force or violence, of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom or any other government de jure or de facto."

It addresses activities aimed at the powers of the state and having political ends.

Lord Lloyd's report took the definition further, but not as far as the Government now propose. The independent review of the legislation stopped far short of the Government's proposals. Lord Lloyd proposed the FBI definition of terrorism as

"the use of serious violence against persons or property, or the threat to use such violence, to intimidate or coerce a government, the public or any section of the public in order to promote political, social or ideological objectives."

I ask the House to reflect on whether it is right to go as far as the Government do in clause 1, which mentions "use or threat" and thereby extends the definition of terrorism. It refers to

"a political, religious or ideological cause",

serious violence against people or property and activities that not only endanger lives, but create

"risks to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public".

We should tread most carefully when extending the legislation from crimes against the state to crimes against individuals and still more carefully if we extend it further to crimes against property.

Mr. Hogg: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. In their definition of terrorism, the Government are addressing not only the intent of an individual, but consequences that may not be intended.

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is quite correct and I shall address his point in a moment.

It is also difficult to define an offence by motivation. To say that a cause is political, religious or ideological poses many questions. For example, does the provision cover deluded religious fanatics who think that they are hearing voices? Does it cover people who are mad,

schizophrenic or paranoid or who believe that they are doing something for ideological reasons? How much does it take into account different degrees of sanity?

When a Bill applies to such a broad category it tends to cover a broad sweep of potential activities. It also becomes extremely difficult to define those activities. It is clearly possible that an environmentalist attacking a field of corn in Lincolnshire would be caught under the Bill as would someone causing serious damage to an animal laboratory in Oxfordshire—even if there were no human being in it—or someone attending a meeting in any of our constituencies at which someone spoke claiming to support a freedom struggle in a democratic country. If we go down that road we will be asking for trouble for ourselves for our reputation as a democracy.

Mr. Maginnis: Is not the hon. Gentleman taking his argument to the point of being ridiculous? Nobody has suggested that terrorism could be predicated on the basis of a mad person or a zealot using violence on another member of the community. Does not terrorism involve groups of people carrying out organised terrorist activities?

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman states what the public think terrorism is and I agree with him. I share his understanding of what terrorism laws should address, but that is not what the Bill says. I am happy to spend time discussing these matters with the hon. Gentleman and our Northern Ireland colleagues as they, above all, deserve our support to make sure that we get the law right. The Bill, however, deals with groups of as few as three people meeting in private. The Bill specifically also does not limit itself to the sort of activity with which, tragically, the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) and his colleagues have had to deal every day. If we are to do anything, we will have to ensure that the House and the country have legislation that can adequately deal with the sort of tragic circumstances that Northern Ireland, above all, has suffered from for so long, but without at the same time accidentally or on purpose sweeping in all sorts of other things that have nothing to do with such terrorist activity.

Mr. Corbyn: I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. He made the point that someone could be arrested in this country under a criminal charge for speaking at a meeting if that person were deemed to be speaking in support of a terrorist organisation against a democratic regime. The problem with that is: how does one define a democratic regime? Many Governments claim an electoral mandate for their activities, yet repress human rights disgracefully. They would claim to be democratic; their opponents would not. Does he not agree that there is a serious problem? Unless we define what we are actually dealing with, we will end up proscribing people whom we do not like or agree with.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is correct. My simplistic definition between democracy and non-democracy tried to make the argument even more bald, but there are many grey areas. One of the things that we did not hear a word about from the Home Secretary was who he might be thinking of proscribing. I give the hon. Gentleman an example.

My constituency includes a small but significant number of people from Sri Lanka. I have in my constituency—it is not a secret building—the office of Tamil Eelam in London. I have been to its meetings. I have talked to Sinhalese Sri Lankans and to Tamil Sri Lankans.

If I go to the headquarters of Tamil Eelam in my constituency for a public meeting that is attended by more than three people and people there support the Tamil Tigers in Jaffna, they could potentially be proscribed and suddenly fall within the ambit of the Bill. The presence of anyone at that meeting would be sufficient to render them guilty of an offence, with all the exceptional powers and penalties associated with that.

It is not just groups from Sri Lanka. It could be groups from Pakistan or Burma or groups representing half the globe at any particular time. Many of those countries are not democratic. They certainly include Burma. One could by no stretch of the imagination believe that that country is a democratic regime.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman had better be even more careful than he has been already. If the Tamil Eelam people ask him for money, they are committing, at least potentially, an offence under clause 14. If he were to give them that money, he would commit an offence under clause 14(3). It is precious little consolation to him to know that he will not be prosecuted unless the Director of Public Prosecutions agrees. It is all on the discretion of an individual.

Mr. Hughes: Early in its stages, the debate is showing that the proposals need the most careful scrutiny, to put it at its mildest.

The clause 38 definition of terrorist takes in clause 10, which deals with membership of proscribed organisations, and clause 11, which deals with people inviting support for proscribed organisations, including—I pick up the point—private meetings of three or more people. Someone may be guilty through association even with someone who is not a member of a proscribed organisation, but who alleges that he is.

The definition also takes in clause 14, which deals with the fundraising provisions to which the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) referred; clause 15, which is about use of money or other property; clause 16, which is about other arrangements; clause 17; clause 52, which is about instruction and training; and clauses 54, 55 and 56. There is a range of implications from the proposed definition of terrorism.

The hon. Member for Slough and others have made the point that clause 18 will make someone guilty if that person discovers something about activities in support of terrorism and says nothing. If that clause goes on to the statute book, many journalists will be guilty without having done any more than that.

Clauses 38 and 39, which deal with arrest and stop-and-search procedures, were originally enacted before the current criminal law arrangements for arrest, stop and search applied. There are strong police arguments that the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 is sufficient. We should not need another extension of the removal of liberty for such purposes because we have new legislation in the general criminal law.

[Mr. Hughes]

Nearly last but not least—it has not yet been mentioned—part VI contains provisions on the possession of articles or membership lists—for example, lists of the Cabinet, as happened on one occasion. Under the Bill, the reversal of the burden of proof presumption will still apply in relation to the collection of information. Five years ago, the current Attorney-General, when Opposition home affairs spokesman in the other place, said that those provisions were far too harsh and draconian. No less a person than the Lord Chief Justice said last year that the provisions, in a

"blatant and obvious way undermined the presumption of innocence."

All those proposals are in the Bill.

Finally, the incitement proposals will catch people who associate themselves with organisations in other countries. As was said earlier, that might have included the ANC 30 years ago, or others today.

I hope that I have shown that my party is clear that we need legislation and that it should be on a United Kingdom-wide basis, with every citizen treated the same. The Bill looks as though it is going too far in favour of the state and away from liberty.

I pay tribute to the people of Northern Ireland. All of us want to make it clear that the least we can do is to recognise their sacrifice, that of their police service and the armed services, who have given their lives when terrorism, which is unacceptable and never justified here, was carried out. We must have a strong law against terrorism, but it must be the right law.

As the right hon. Gentleman for Bridgwater said, additional powers need additional safeguards. Legislation with additional powers needs additional scrutiny. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will support our proposal that the Bill should go to a Special Standing Committee and that the Government, who have suggested that they are not absolutely opposed to that option, feel able to support it by 10.15 this evening. In any event, I hope that, by the time the Bill comes out of Committee, we will not have put on to the statute book in haste a Bill that may cause us, and many of our citizens, to repent at leisure.

6.8 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Before I came to the debate, I attended a pensioners function at the Islington Irish centre in my constituency. I was there briefly. One person was treated, correctly, as a welcome guest—it was Gerry Conlon, one of the Guildford Four. He spent more than half his life in British prisons for an offence that he did not commit, on the basis of evidence that was collected after the first arrest of a person under the prevention of terrorism Act—Paul Hill. Subsequently, the other three so-called members of the group were arrested, charged and imprisoned. It took an enormous campaign to get them out of prison.

The PTA was rushed through the House in 1974 in the wake of the appalling events in Birmingham. It was seen to be temporary and a solution to the problem. As my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Audrey Wise) has pointed out to me, it was supposed last for six months, but, 24½ years later, it is being renewed in a permanent form—perhaps in an even more draconian form—by the Bill that the House is being asked to give a Second Reading to today.

Few people were charged successfully under the PTA, and the number charged at all was small. Indeed, the number convicted was tiny. In fact, the Act always had a more sinister role, in that it allowed people to be questioned and investigated.

I was first elected to this House in 1983. My constituency includes a large number of Irish people. There was often a sense of terror among the community when people travelling from Belfast or Dublin failed to arrive, because it was feared that they were being held for questioning under the PTA. To find out from the police at Paddington Green or in Belfast whether a person had been arrested involved a labyrinthine procedure. Often, the police did not own up to arresting someone. When asked whether a certain person was being held, officers would answer, "I can't say." The next question would be, "How many people are you holding at the moment?" The police officer would say, "I don't know, I think it's only one."

Leon Brittan, the former Home Secretary, in a 1985 interview on Radio Telefis Eireann, defended the PTA and said that it was used not for prosecution, but to gain information through questioning people. However, the vast majority of those questioned under the Act did not have access to legal representation. They were held incommunicado and their families did not know what was happening to them.

The PTA was a disgraceful piece of legislation that did much to damage civil liberties throughout the United Kingdom, not just in Northern Ireland. It caused this country an awful lot of problems on the world stage. We are being asked to approve a Bill that will make permanent most of the PTA's faults. That is extremely regrettable.

It is also regrettable that the Bill flies in the face of the general thrust of the Government's proclaimed legislative programme on civil liberties and human rights. There are Bills on freedom of information and on human rights, and the European convention on human rights is being incorporated into British law. From next year, all the case law of the European Court of Human Rights will be incorporated into British case law. That is welcome and it represents a good step forward, but there are two aberrations—the rushed legislation following the abominable acts in Omagh in August 1998, and this Bill.

In his opening speech, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary quoted Lord Lloyd's 1988 review of the legislation, in which it was stated that legislation against terrorism should approximate as closely as possible to ordinary criminal law and procedure. However, this Bill goes much further, and its implications are much more far reaching than those of any other legislation. We should pause and think clearly about that.

The Bill will get its Second Reading; both Front Benches are agreed on that. The Liberal Democrats have tabled an amendment proposing that the Bill be referred to a Special Standing Committee, and I support that. However, Members who are asked to agree proposals that will have a serious effect on the human rights of people in this country—and, by implication, of people all over the world—should stop for a moment's serious thought about those proposals. I shall return to that matter and the enormous effects internationally that have been demonstrated in numerous examples.

As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) noted, the Bill contains no provision for review. The original 1974 Act provided for a six-monthly review: accordingly, debates were held in the House every six months, after which Labour Members would religiously vote against renewal on the ground that the Act threatened civil liberties. I do not know what has changed between May 1997 and now that allows some of the most draconian provisions of the PTA to be acceptable, when they were unacceptable before.

Clause 1 offers a definition of terrorism that is much broader than any previous definition. It includes religious threats and threats to property, and it is not clear how wide its scope is. That requires careful thought. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said, the international implications are enormous. Dozens of meetings are held in my constituency each year by various international solidarity groups. The countries involved include Sri Lanka, Peru, South Africa, China, Tibet, Korea and Indonesia. In addition, meetings have been held by groups from most of the countries of Latin America.

Many people speak at those meetings and express sympathy for the armed insurrection or other action taking place in the country involved. Are those people, or the ones attending such meetings, to be criminalised? Fellow speakers at the same meeting may not endorse military or armed action against a regime, but will they be criminalised, too? My understanding of the Bill is that they will. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said that it was not his wish to criminalise such people, and I accept that, but he will not be Home Secretary for ever.

Audrey Wise (Preston) *rose—*

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Corbyn: I am spoilt for choice. I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Preston.

Audrey Wise: Does my hon. Friend recall that for many years it was Labour party policy to supply arms to the African National Congress? Help was not confined to silent consent, but extended to aid in the armed struggle.

Mr. Corbyn: I recall the resolution to set up the southern Africa solidarity fund being passed at a party conference in the early 1970s. It included no definition of where the money would go or how it was to be used. However, the clear implication was that it would be used to support the opposition in South Africa to the apartheid regime.

Mr. Hogg: I support the hon. Gentleman in this matter. He has described solidarity groups, whose function is to raise money. Clause 14 makes it plain that a person invited to give money is committing an offence. It is no good saying that such people would be prosecuted only with the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions. The very fact that there is a possibility that an offence might be committed will deter people from inviting money or contributing money. To that extent, the Bill diminishes civil rights regardless of whether there is a prosecution.

Mr. Corbyn: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is correct: that is what clause 14 will do. Indeed, I observed the effects of the [illegible] Act on the Irish community where I live. It diminished political debate because people were afraid of being picked up and held under the PTA provisions.

I was a union official at that time, looking after a substantial number of Irish members. Many of them were detained—erroneously, as it turned out—under the PTA. Their experience was so frightening that many have not recovered. That is why I maintain that we must think very carefully before passing measures such as those proposed in the Bill.

Mr. McNamara: Does not my hon. Friend recall that many thousands of people held at ports and airports under the PTA were never charged? The Bill will allow that practice to continue.

Mr. Corbyn: That is true but, as they were not charged, it is unclear where those many thousands of people appear in the statistics pertaining to the PTA. Constituents of mine who have been held for periods of between half an hour and two hours have been told that they are answering questions. The words "prevention of terrorism Act" have been uttered, but, as no formal process has ever been established, there is no certainty that they ever appear in any statistics.

Article 11 of the European convention provides that people have a right of peaceful assembly and association throughout Europe. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said that he had received no legal opinion to the effect that the Bill would be outwith the convention's scope, or that any of its provisions could be declared illegal under the convention.

I am not a lawyer, and I am not legally qualified, but I beg to differ. Many sections of European human rights law give rights of assembly and of political debate and organisation that are far greater than those specifically proscribed in the Bill. My right hon. Friend defended the Bill by saying that there remains an avenue for judicial review, but that is simply not good enough.

Although I am not a lawyer, I know that a judicial review is a review of a decision to determine whether it was made correctly in law. It is not a review of the decision, but of the quality of the decision and the way in which it was made. Therefore, it is not a defence for the Home Secretary to say that there is access to judicial review. There is access to judicial review for almost anything, if it can be brought to court. That is not the same as a right of appeal against a decision. The emergency powers on arrest—particularly in clauses 34 and 35 and schedule 7—would appear to be contrary to the international obligations to which this country has signed up willingly.

I am concerned also about the access to legal representation. I opened my remarks by talking about what happened when the PTA was passed, and the way in which people could be held for a considerable time without charge, trial or access to lawyers. We are going beyond that in denying people access to legal representation for 48 hours. Under existing legislation, it can be for only 36 hours under exceptional circumstances. We should be extremely careful about that.

Once the authorities start arresting people and denying them access to legal representation, all sorts of other things can happen—including the most appalling

[Mr. Corbyn]

transgressions, which can become the most appalling miscarriages of justice. Some of the victims of those miscarriages of justice in this country were victors, in the sense that they were freed, such as Judith Ward, the Guildford Four, the Birmingham Six and a number of others. The Criminal Cases Review Commission was set up to deal with the question of the right of access to law. No such thing appears to apply in the Bill.

I am concerned about the international implications of clauses 57, 58 and 59. I have a list of organisations that are proscribed by the US State Department. It includes a vast number of organisations with weird and wonderful titles, some of which I have never heard of, and a number of which I know for certain no longer exist. Interestingly enough—given that the list comes from the United States—not one Irish organisation is listed. The Kosovo Liberation Army was removed from the list, as it was transformed from a terrorist organisation into a liberation force in record time. Many other organisations have taken many years to achieve that change in status.

We must be clear on what could happen. This country prides itself on its tradition of granting rights of political asylum for people to pursue a political agenda for their own country in Britain. The borough that I have the honour to represent is full of such people. Today, I had a long chat with some Italians about Garibaldi, who lived in Islington for a while—as did many others. They all pass through; some of us stay.

Mr. McNamara: Some become Prime Minister.

Mr. Corbyn: Some stay on the Back Benches, and are happy with that. Biscuits were named after Garibaldi.

Under the Bill, Garibaldi would be locked up as quick as anything, as he was calling for armed insurrection and the overthrow of the Government in Italy. He was successful, and went back and achieved that. Sun Yat Sen, who campaigned against the Chinese Emperor, would have been culpable under the Bill.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey referred to Sri Lanka. I have been to many meetings concerned with the efforts to bring peace to Sri Lanka. If we are to get a peace process in Sri Lanka, we have to reckon with the Tamil Tigers—it cannot be achieved without negotiations with them. Under the Bill, such groups could become illegal and proscribed organisations in Britain, so that peace discussions would be impossible here—and, very rapidly, elsewhere.

My constituency includes many Kurdish and Turkish people. The PKK is a significant force. It has declared a cease fire in Turkey, but it could be argued that it is a terrorist organisation. Certainly the Turkish Government would argue that. They would argue that there is evidence that the PKK has plotted armed insurrection in Turkey and, therefore, it could be declared illegal here. What are we to do then? Are we to ban, deport or imprison these people? What would that do to bring about a resolution of the dreadful conflict in Turkey?

There must be political solutions, as has been recognised in Northern Ireland and South Africa. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) did not seem able to answer my question of whether, had the Bill been in force in the 1960s and 1970s, the ANC offices in my borough at that time would have been closed down. Would the ANC have been deemed to be a terrorist organisation because of its obvious links with the struggle that Umkhonto we Sizwe was waging within South Africa? There are many other examples.

Ministers say that this is okay because they are going to proscribe only organisations which oppose democratic regimes. That is a difficult area to define. I am not in sympathy in any way with what Sendero Luminoso has done in Peru, or the way in which it has carried out its struggle. Sendero Luminoso, or its representatives here, would argue that the Peruvian Government are not a democratic organisation because they suspended the constitution and carried out their war against that organisation.

Sendero Luminoso would argue that it is democratic. We might argue that it is not. We could then end up banning that organisation from having any representatives in Britain because it is opposed to a democratic Government, when there is plenty of evidence that the Government are not that democratic in the first place. There are many other such examples to be found all over the world.

We should think more carefully and more seriously about this issue, because otherwise we will end up putting people on trial because their own Governments want us to do that. We will then get into the murky area of the commercial links that these regimes have with companies in this country, and the pressure on the British Government to achieve higher export earnings. I remember the campaign mounted in this House by Conservative Members against opposition elements from Saudi Arabia because they were more interested in defence contracts with that country than in human rights there. That could apply to many other countries around the world.

The Bill has been proposed without the necessary thought. It has the support of both Front Benches, which usually makes me suspicious and should make everybody careful. If we are serious about democracy, accountability and a due process of law, this is no way to achieve that. It is the opposite direction to that of the Freedom of Information Bill, human rights law and the European convention on human rights.

I recognise that the House will give the Bill a Second Reading, but I hope that it will be committed to a Special Standing Committee, to which the amendment invites us to agree. Above all, I hope that there will be some significant changes because we are in danger of putting on to the statute book some draconian legislation—far more draconian than any of the temporary provisions that have been rushed through this House during previous crises. We are not in a crisis at the moment, so surely it is time to do something far more rational and sane than what is proposed this evening.

6.28 pm

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): It is strange that so many hon. Members here tonight have referred to terrorism as though it were something new, rather than something which goes back to time immemorial. Terrorism, not only in this country but throughout the world, has been with us for as long as there has been history.

In recent times, we have been brought to our senses by 30 years of terrorism emanating from that part of the United Kingdom in which I live. It gives me no

satisfaction to say that this should not be seen as extraordinary or special legislation, but rather as necessary legislation within any democracy if we wish to protect that democracy—a democracy that has evolved over centuries to bring us to this point.

If we had not dealt with terrorism and potential terrorism at the start, we might have found ourselves in situations of escalating violence, such as the violence that occurs in parts of the Balkans or between the Hutus and Tutsis in Africa. The difficult decisions taken in this House meant that terrorism in Northern Ireland did not reach such awful proportions. Those decisions may not have been popular; they may have impacted on what I considered were my civil rights, but they were taken to keep two traditions from carrying out greater acts of violence than has been the case over the past 30 years. The legislation isolated the men of violence on both sides.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maginnis: Not at this stage—later on I will.

I welcome the way in which the Government have sought to combine the EPA and PTA in the Bill. It helps me, as someone living in Northern Ireland, to feel part of the United Kingdom. Ninety per cent. of the community—the ordinary, decent people who live normal lives—do not want to feel that they are somehow pariahs within the United Kingdom because they have had to deal with the terrorism that emanates from both traditions in Northern Ireland.

Governments have had to recognise that terrorism has changed vastly over 30 years. I first encountered terrorism 40 years ago. As a young schoolteacher, just out of college, I was in the midst of what was known as the 1956-62 campaign. There were very few cars on the roads in those days, and young people did not have access to transport. There was no internet 40 years ago and no mobile phones—indeed, very few people had phones at home.

Terrorists then were most obliging. When they were caught, as they invariably were, they went to the courts, lined up like turkeys volunteering for Christmas, said that they did not recognise the courts and were put in prison for a few years. Many were allowed out early—all they had to do was sign a declaration that they would not get involved in terrorism again, and out they came.

I am afraid that the changes over those 40 years have been considerable. Now the means to communicate, move around the country and organise are more sophisticated. The Government have an almost impossible task. They must enact legislation that ensures the integrity of the police, and of society as a whole. The legislation must also be flexible enough to cope with the terrorists exploitation of the law and the judicial system. It must be able to cope with the violence of terrorism, the racketeering and the money laundering—with everything that would substitute anarchy for democracy.

The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) spoke of his delight that Castlereagh is closing as a holding centre. It may surprise him to hear that I, too, am pleased that it is closing, but for a different reason. It is not because I saw Castlereagh as a threat to me or to the majority of people, but because the level of violence in Northern Ireland is decreasing. Castlereagh is no longer needed. Excesses may have occurred—when people are fearful and have a responsibility to deal with those who are conditioned to resist the normal processes of law, there can be excesses—but they were consistently dealt with as they arose.

The real issue about Castlereagh is that hundreds of lives were saved because of the work done in the holding centres—the detection, charging and convicting of terrorists. We always hear about the charges and convictions that were wrong. About 400 terrorists, give or take a couple of score, have just been released from the Maze.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maginnis: The reality is that those people were convicted because of the work done in places such as Castlereagh by a police force constantly under criticism from people who should know better but who have, and have always had, green-tinted spectacles. They are tedious in their defence of what is wrong without seeking to recognise the victims of the terrorist. I shall now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Corbyn: The hon. Gentleman suffers from the tedium of others a great deal. I hope that I can help him in that respect.

Did all the legislation on Northern Ireland—the EPA and the PTA—and factors such as internment and stop-and-search powers bring about a peace settlement? Or was it ultimately a process of engagement and a recognition of the traditions of both communities? Was it not the political process over the past four years that brought about a peace process and, we hope, a permanent peace in Northern Ireland, rather than all the repressive legislation that so damaged civil liberties and imprisoned so many innocent people?

Mr. Maginnis: I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would ask me a rather more difficult question. Each measure that he mentioned was necessary in its time. He seems to forget that 80 per cent. of all planned terrorist activity was frustrated by the action that was taken within the law that was available to the police and members of the Army.

It was in 1990, after going on the streets to boast, "20 years and not defeated", that Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, saw the reality of the situation. Twenty years and not being defeated did not mean that it was ever going to win. It was encouraged, bit by bit, to move towards the political process. I do not, like some people, regret its involvement in the political process. I hope that it can carry that to its logical conclusion and give up the guns, bombs and threats that have sustained it for the past 30 years but have brought heartbreak to my part of this kingdom. If it can do so, I, unlike the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), will not regret it.

I mention the hon. Member for Belfast, East only because it is unavoidable when one talks about attitudes towards the police, the law, the Army and terrorism. The hon. Gentleman and his ministerial colleague from the Democratic Unionist party, Mr. Dodds, yesterday tried a publicity gimmick which they must have thought would detract from the real business in Armagh. Ministers from Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic sat down as

[Mr. Maginnis]

democrats, none having authority over another, to decide how they might mutually act in the best interests of both the jurisdictions on the island.

However, the hon. Member for Belfast, East boycotted this process and could only complain that he could not get police protection so that he could visit a police station at, I think, Forkhill in South Armagh. He had not gone there in 1974, 1979, 1984, 1989 or 1994, so why did he have to go along on one particular day in 1999? And why on earth should he expect special police protection? Some of us have lived our whole lives without police protection in Northern Ireland. We would not want it when our constituents face the threats that they have faced for 30 years. I have lost more than 200 constituents, and I do not expect or want—I would not accept—more security than the police and the Army can give to my constituents.

I do not know why the hon. Member for Belfast, East whinged so much yesterday. He whinged that he could not have a helicopter to take him to South Armagh. Is it the logic of his argument that if the Army gave him a helicopter, it would have to give one to Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, too when they go there? His argument is ridiculous. He whinged a bit more about the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary not doing his job.

The hon. Member for Belfast, East allegedly protects the police, and claims to have the interests of the police at heart. Like me, he feels great antipathy towards much of the Patten report. Is not one of the best ways in which to undermine or change the Patten report to criticise the Chief Constable and the command structure of the RUC?

The hon. Gentleman is the same person who went to Clontibret. He is the man who whinged that if he were jailed in the Republic, his throat would be cut while he was in prison. He is the man who prefers stunts to trying to move forward a process, even if it is an exceedingly difficult one. My fear is that the IRA and other paramilitary groups may not disarm, but I believe that the hon. Gentleman fears that they will.

I want the Bill to ensure that no part of the United Kingdom will have to go through what we have been through for 30 years. That is why I am surprised to hear speaking against the Bill the very people who urged me to take a chance on how we deal with terrorism in Northern Ireland and how we accommodate those who say that they are prepared to move away from terrorism but who have yet to provide evidence of that. I am willing to take a chance, and I have taken one. But rather than moving forward during the time I have been in the House, the hon. Member for Hull, North and the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn)—I have been here as long as he has—have regressed into their bigoted, narrow, little, green-tinted world. They make no contribution whatever to attempts to convince the people of Northern Ireland across the political divide that they have a genuine understanding, let alone a proper interest.

Part II of the Bill worries me. The Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission seems to be inadequately dealt with. How will it operate? From past experience, I fear that the Secretary of State could, in a benevolent mood one day, decide that as an organisation had not been heard from for a couple of months he should end its proscription. In fact, there must be solid information on whether any proscribed organisation has moved permanently away from violence. We must ensure that the RUC special branch is properly equipped and resourced so that it can deal adequately with the huge list of proscribed organisations.

If we follow the Patten route for special branch, it will be gradually subsumed within the CID. I seek the Home Secretary's assurance that there will be adequate resources, particularly in Northern Ireland, to maintain the work of special branch. Some of my hon. Friends will recall that when terrorism once again raised its ugly head in Northern Ireland in 1970, the available amount of high-grade intelligence on which the Government could act was low. We must not leave the police without resources adequate to deal with the huge list of proscribed organisations.

In relation to schedule 2, I might ask the Secretary of State what is in a name. For example, there was a coalition of Continuity IRA, Irish National Liberation Army and Provisional IRA dissidents known as Uglaigh na hEireann, but it is not among the proscribed organisations in the schedule. Perhaps like the Real IRA, which is also not listed, it qualifies for proscription under the generic term, "the IRA". I want to ensure that that is the case.

The organisation that I know as the Continuity IRA is alluded to in the schedule as the Continuity Army Council. Based on my remarks about the use of the generic term, I wonder whether the CAC is another name used by the Continuity IRA. If that name were changed tomorrow, must we add the new name to the list of proscribed organisations, or is there a means by which the Bill can encompass the fact that the previous name was the Continuity Army Council? I hope that we can receive an answer on how we deal with such matters.

Some important provisions under clause 18 were, surprisingly, dismissed by some of those hon. Members who made more positive contributions to the debate. Those provisions deal with the obligation of disclosure where money or property resulted from, or was to be used for, illegal purposes. It struck me that, rather than being too tightly drawn, those provisions are somewhat loose, inasmuch as a person is not required to make a declaration if he believes that his business or organisation has established a means of identifying illegal property or money.

It might be helpful if such a person were required not to assume that the procedure for making a disclosure was adequate for that purpose. We are aware that all sorts of businesses—such as public houses or filling stations—operate as a cover for illegal activity in Northern Ireland. We have no doubt that, should terrorism rise again, the funds for terrorist organisations would emanate from such apparently legitimate businesses.

Under clause 18(5), professional legal advisers are excused from the need to pass on information. That applies when a crime has been committed, but should there not be some clarification? For example, in a case where a professional legal adviser has reason to believe that the life, or lives, of a person, or persons, may be at risk, should he not have an obligation of disclosure? That matter should be covered in the Bill.

Why does the responsibility for disclosure apply only to people in professional environments? As I recall it, that differs from provisions under earlier legislation, which

required people in domestic or social environments to make known illegal activity, or a cover for illegal activity. Why have such measures not been included?

I conclude by pointing out that terrorism becomes as sophisticated as the legislation designed to inhibit it; in fact, of necessity, it becomes more sophisticated. It is important that the Bill, as it evolves through its various stages over the forthcoming months, is flexible enough to adapt to the changing nature of terrorism. Hon. Members should be assured that terrorism and the nature of terrorism will continue to evolve.

6.56 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Victor Hugo said:

"An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come."

I suspect that, were Victor Hugo to witness our debate today, he might caution us that an invasion of liberties might be justified, but not if it is based on an obsession with ideas whose time has passed. Sadly, we need to recall the past in order to see where we are at present. We stand at the edge of the possibility of a lasting peace in Ireland. That is as uncertain as it is exciting, and will, no doubt, bring its own challenges.

However, the opportunities offered by that possibility mean that we must roll back the frontiers of our presumptions—how far our obsessions with terrorism dictate the framework within which we view the whole of society. Given that we have reached this point, it is surprising and disappointing that the Bill would dramatically extend the scope of our definition of terrorism.

For two or three years, many of the big global corporations—especially those involved with biotechnologies—have been telling us that they require new rules from Governments to protect the ability of corporations to exploit. They regularly refer to the actions of social movements that oppose them as environmental terrorism. They are keen to push this phrase into the language of our view of society and of our civil rights legislation.

Although in the UK we face a period of extended peace, it is also true that, under the agenda that is gathering for the start of the next century, there will be a dramatic growth in social movements involved in direct action. In many ways that is a consequence of Governments—including our Government—deciding that they are not able to defend public rights against corporate acquisitions. We have seen this in many of the debates on the World Trade Organisation, and in several debates on the interference with common rights of citizens in Europe. Time after time, Ministers have to stand at the Dispatch Box and say, "The hon. Member may have an important point, but I am powerless to intervene. This is outside the Government's control. We are not in a position to protect our own citizens' rights." In consequence, we are witnessing a global resurgence of citizens' movements, saying, "If democratically elected Governments can no longer protect citizens' rights, we shall have to do so ourselves."

Inevitably, some of those social movements will not only challenge the status quo but find themselves in breach of the law. It is terribly sad that we have chosen this moment to change the definition of terrorism that the House has worked to, in order to extend the remit of control and intrusion directly into the lives of those social movements.

At the start of the debate, the Home Secretary actually said that terrorism legislation should be directed at action by organisations that were determined to undermine the foundation of government itself. That is the definition of terrorism that makes the most sense to me. To colleagues from Northern Ireland, I would simply say that the important challenge of this time is about moving away from presumptions about terrorism and simply looking at ways in which the extension of the criminal law can be made realistic and accessible.

In that context, it would be a tragedy if we used the Bill as an opportunity to extend the mentality of terrorism into the social fabric and organisation of the whole United Kingdom. Yet that is precisely what the definition in clause 1 would seek to do. It is to turn direct action movements into potentially terrorist movements. The consequences of that would be devastatingly destructive for the whole of the social fabric of the United Kingdom.

As other hon. Members have pointed out, clause 1 raises huge questions about the language in which it is written. It is pointless for the Home Secretary to say, "I am terribly sorry; laws are constructed from language, but let me give you some assurances about meaning," because the words are the only legacy that the House gives to society in the laws that we pass. Assurances about interpretation are not deliverable in the courts or the judicial processes or, more specifically, in extrajudicial processes. There is a long history of a much more limited and destructive set of interpretations subsequently being placed on words used in legislation that has passed through this House.

Who will define "serious violence"? Who will define serious violence against the person? Who will define serious violence against property? Who will then say when an act of terrorism falls outside the scope of existing criminal law, in relation to the advancement of a political, religious or ideological cause?

Audrey Wise: Would my hon. Friend care to take account of those people who commit serious violence against property, not with a view to destroying life, but with a view to saving life? I think of those women—some of whom were acquitted—who attacked the Hawk aircraft with hammers, and of the Trident Ploughshares 2000 organisation, which attacked the Trident submarine to save life, not to destroy it. They may be right or wrong—we could discuss that at length—but are they terrorists?

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The actions taken by the women in Trident Ploughshares 2000 were dealt with very differently in Scotland and in England. In Scotland, the sheriff acquitted them; in England, they were found guilty. However, in both cases they were tried under criminal law, not under the terrorism Acts. It is crucial for us to declare, at this stage, that such issues must be dealt with within the framework of the criminal law system. As soon as we start to move into presumptions about terrorism, we transform the relationship between civil protest movements and elected Parliaments and the judicial system.

Mr. Corbyn: Does my hon. Friend agree that the French Government's action in ordering the sinking of the

[Mr. Corbyn]

Rainbow Warrior—and the death of two sailors on it—in New Zealand was an act of terrorism, as was the United States bombardment of the medical factory in the Sudan? Does he agree that, when we are talking about terrorism, we must also think very seriously about the whole concept of state terrorism?

Mr. Simpson: It just goes to show what a terribly complicated area this takes us into.

I shall cite my own examples—examples that cause me huge uncertainties about where they would fit in relation to the Bill's provisions. What happens to those Kurds who are involved in the opposition to the building of the Ilusu dam, which would forcibly remove tens of thousands from their homes, and from which there would be no environmental gain but real political gain for a Government who wish to get shot of, or to silence, their Kurdish population? Many of us in this country have actively supported that movement, and yet it would appear that the wording of the Bill, especially in the definitional framework of clause 1, would make that activity illegal.

What would happen to the opposition by the tribal peoples of the Amazon to the corporate destruction of the rain forests? Many of us have also been involved in active support for those campaigns of resistance, and would certainly provide platforms and meeting places for some of the main campaigners in the United Kingdom. We would seek to work internationally to provide a framework of support for those organisations—and yet all of that would appear to be caught within definitions of terrorism in the different clauses.

I have been involved in campaigning work with Indian farmers and peasants and consumer movements, who have a campaign called Cremate Monsanto. It is terribly clear and unsophisticated. Its aim is to burn down the fields of crops that they see as likely to do devastating damage to their own ecosystem and their prospects of survival. That too would be defined as an act of terrorism within the Bill, and supporting their campaigns would also be so defined.

Mr. Hogg: One need not look abroad to see the difficulties that are posed. The plain truth is that if an organisation threatens to grub up large quantities of genetically modified crops, it is threatening an activity that falls within the scope of clause 1; and if someone wants to subscribe money to that organisation, they are committing an offence under clause 14. It is pointless for Ministers to say that the Director of Public Prosecutions would not authorise a prosecution; the plain truth is that democratic activity is inhibited by the fear of the offence that is being created.

Mr. Simpson: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for bringing me to that point. I spoke at a rally in Oxfordshire, organised jointly by Greenpeace and Genetix Snowball. I congratulated them on having logic and ethics on their side, but said that they did not need to occupy the adjacent field of genetically modified crops. However, they took no notice of my advice, and peacefully occupied it.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right that such an occupation would fall within the Bill's definition of an act of terrorism. Those who supported it would similarly be caught within the terms of the Bill. In this case it would not only have been myself; it would also have been the large number of decorated ex-service men who turned out in their full regalia of medals, who told me that they had fought two wars—certainly the last one against fascism—and felt that the prospects of food fascism being forced on them by multinational companies required them to come out and peacefully sit down in those fields, in the knowledge that they were destroying those crops. They were organised acts of a political or ideological nature that certainly did damage to property.

I hope that the people who committed those acts understood that they were taking risks within the existing framework of the criminal law. However, that would not, under any current circumstances, redefine them as terrorists.

We are being asked to accept a real paradigm shift. Somehow the threat to the stability of the state has given way to threats to the corporate estate, and that will be the basis for the new definition of social terrorism. That is a desperately dangerous path to go down.

On a lighter note, the Bill may result in the need to rewrite episodes in "The Archers" that dealt with the trial of Tommy Archer. Those who follow "The Archers" realise that Tommy Archer was tried under the criminal law. But, if the Bill goes through, he would have to be tried as a terrorist. If its provisions were accepted, Tommy Archer would be unlikely to get off—even in "The Archers". Is there any value to society in going down a path that runs the risk of turning large sections of its members into social terrorists?

Mr. Simon Hughes: The even more worrying point in support of the hon. Gentleman's remarks is that we are being asked to make that shift with the Home Secretary providing no evidence or making the case in the House that the current law does not adequately deal with the problems that the hon. Gentleman has described.

Mr. Simpson: That is absolutely the point that I want to make. I have waited in vain to hear any evidence that the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 fails to provide us with the abilities to tackle the issues that have been mentioned to justify the Bill. Nothing has been cited in the debate so far which has offered a shred of evidential support for that.

I have referred to causes that I support which could all fall within the terms of the Bill. However, it is also important to refer to at least one cause that I do not support. I am an opponent of this cause, but I would defend to the hilt the right of its members not to be redefined as terrorists. I am referring—and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) may wish to reflect on this—to anti-abortion campaigners. We all know that in the United States militant anti-abortion campaigners pose threats to people's lives and they certainly pose threats and do damage to property.

Such offences should be dealt with under the criminal law, but would I wish to see them defined as acts of terrorism? If they are defined as terrorism under the terms of the Bill, all those who offer succour and support to such religious or ideological campaigns could similarly find themselves caught within the term. They would be open to the same presumptions about the right of arrest, the right to seize documents and the right to be challenged

about whether they act as channels for the direction of money or publicity support. Even though the cause or campaign is one that I do not support, it is not right to redefine such behaviour as acts of terrorism. Offences must continue to be dealt with in the framework of the current criminal law.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Free the Vatican One.

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend says, "Free the Vatican One" and he illustrates the Bill's danger. It becomes harder to envisage which social, direct action campaigns will not be caught within its remit.

We must consider carefully the clauses that would present real difficulties to such campaigns. Clauses 14 to 17 are about the provision of assistance. They will bring solidarity groups within the Bill's terms of reference. Clause 18 sets out a duty to provide information and puts people under an obligation to act upon their "suspicions". The failure to do so can constitute an offence that may warrant up to five years in prison—and acts of solidarity can carry a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Clause 54, which is the highlight of them all, and is about directing the activities of criminal groups, introduces an offence that can carry a lifetime sentence.

I return to the example that I gave about Genetix Snowball. It held a press conference in the House of Commons at which its press officer explained why the group was taking action to occupy fields of genetically modified crops. It is clear from the terms of clause 54 that that press officer would have been guilty of organising "at any level" the activities of Genetix Snowball. He would have fallen under the terms of the Terrorism Bill. It is crazy that its reach should extend so far and so destructively. It is a catch-all Bill that will net, if not all Members of the House, some fairly prominent Members of it.

I urge the Home Secretary to reflect on the fact that at least two of his ministerial colleagues occupied prominent positions in the campaign "Stop the 70s Tour". Many were involved in direct activities that were damaging to property and that were unambiguously ideological. They were designed to bring about the collapse of the apartheid regime. Not only would such campaigners have been caught then, but at least one of my hon. Friends is now ideally placed in the Foreign Office to conspire with others involved in international liberation struggles. Under this Bill, that may also be redefined as terrorism. This highlights the absurdity of what it could inadvertently catch within its reach.

I shall be brief in adding to the list of issues that the Bill's Committee will have to consider. The whole House should be concerned about any extension of the remit for extrajudicial activities, such as extending the rights to stop and search, to enter premises, to make arrests without warrant and to seize documents. Those are serious extensions into, and serious erosions of, civil liberties. There may be a crisis in the security services if a lasting peace breaks out in Ireland. However, we cannot offer some sort of job saving new deal scheme for the security services simply by extending the presumptions of terrorist activities into and across the whole United Kingdom.

The Bill is also in danger of presenting us with a two-track judicial system in which there is a much greater extension of reverse presumptions. Parts of the Bill make it quite clear that it will be the arrested person's obligation to prove his or her innocence. That is a complete reversal of one of the central tenets of our judicial system. Anyone who has been down that path will know how difficult it is to prove one's innocence. The basis of any credible justice system is that it has to prove guilt; it is not for the accused to prove their innocence.

There are three challenges that must be met in Committee. First, we need to begin at the point suggested by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), which is to spell out exactly what is not covered within the framework of existing criminal law—particularly the Police and Criminal Evidence Act—that would justifiably be included in a terrorism Bill.

Secondly, we ought to consider a different definition of terrorism. I ask the Home Secretary to consider for a moment the definition used in the Reinsurance (Acts of Terrorism) Act 1993, which says that terrorism

"means acts of persons acting on behalf of, or in connection with, any organisation which carries out activities directed towards the overthrowing or influencing, by force or violence, of Her Majesty's government in the United Kingdom or any other government de jure or de facto."

We may want to include considerations about whether those Governments are democratically elected, but that definition returns us to the recognition that the concept of terrorism has to be, and be seen to be, a threat to the stability of the state, not to the sanctity of corporate profits.

Thirdly, in any extension of terrorism legislation, we have to recognise that exceptional measures have not only to be justified through exceptional scrutiny but constrained by conditional approval. Any such provision ought not to be passed by the House without the House being given the duty and the opportunity to review the adequacy of the legislation if not annually, at least every five years. To do less than that would be to do a disservice not only to the society that put us in the House, but to the House itself and the principles of democratically elected and accountable Government.

7.22 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): It was clear even before today's debate that the Bill had generated a great deal of interest and no little controversy. This afternoon's debate has confirmed that, but by this stage many of the salient features have been rehearsed, so I shall be brief. I want to pick up one or two points in what we have discussed.

The first is parliamentary scrutiny, which was almost the last point raised by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), and was also mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). One of the more reassuring features of the prevention of terrorism Act and the emergency provisions Act was the level of parliamentary scrutiny to which they were subject.

As the House knows, they were reviewed thoroughly every five years; their implementation was subject to an annual independent review, and the Act had to be renewed annually after a debate and the opportunity of a vote in this place. That was deemed the appropriate way to handle emergency and temporary provisions of an exceptional nature.

[Mr. Andrew Hunter]

Over the years, we have listened to and respected the views of a succession of Labour shadow Home Secretaries, including the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), who viewed emergency provisions and the PTA as affronts to liberties, to be tolerated, if at all, only because of the threat and reality of Irish terrorism. I am therefore genuinely and greatly puzzled to find Labour Members, now that they are in government, willing to abandon the important mechanisms of parliamentary scrutiny of the sort of measures that they previously hesitated to support and sometimes did not support.

Successive Governments deemed that those mechanisms were necessary to scrutinise such legislation. Why cannot there be a statutory five-year review and an annual report on the implementation of this proposed permanent legislation? Why cannot there be roughly the same procedures of the annual debate and vote? I cannot understand why that should not happen. If it cannot happen, it begs the question whether it is wise to move into an era of permanent anti-terrorism legislation.

The second issue is the one on which most of the debate has been focused—a definition of terrorism, which is the inherent problem in any attempt to draft anti-terrorism legislation. I started listening to the debate with an open mind but with a general approval of the Government's approach. I had watched, as many hon. Members had, the evolution of that line of thinking, predominantly through the reports of Lord Lloyd of Berwick.

The more that the debate has unravelled, however, the more concerned I have become about the line that the Government have adopted. I should like to think that a distinction could be drawn between acts of terrorism that happen in a mature democracy, where the Government can be and are changed through the ballot box, and those that occur in a country where there is not what, for convenience, one might call a genuinely democratic Government. The various contributions to the debate have shown that such a strict distinction is hard to maintain, even untenable.

That is a supremely important issue to which we must return, first in Committee and no doubt in later stages. I fear greatly that the Bill could be used to take false steps, albeit with the best of intentions. Much thought must be given to the whole issue of defining terrorism. I suspect that ultimately one cannot reach a universal interpretation, definition and application of the concept of terrorism.

The final point that I want to raise has not been touched on greatly in this debate. It is the thorny problem of detention and the European convention on human rights. The previous Government considered in detail amending the PTA to make the judiciary responsible for authorising the extension of detention. They concluded that there was no way to do that without undermining the independence of the judiciary, especially in Northern Ireland, so the derogation that they entered after the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights on the Brogan case remained in force.

Not all of us on the Government Back Benches at the time were entirely happy with that, not least because we saw that the judiciary was increasingly assuming a review role in other areas of the law. Although we accepted that the independence of the judiciary should not be undermined—especially, perhaps, in Northern Ireland where such matters are more sensitive—some of us thought that it could be avoided by creating a separate, independent judicial body for that purpose.

I was therefore encouraged to find in the present Government's consultation paper, "Legislation Against Terrorism", that such a body was one of the three options that they were then offering. They put forward the idea of creating an independent commission along the lines of that established by the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997. I regret that the Government have not followed that course.

Paragraph 24(4) of schedule 7 details different arrangements for the judicial authority that can lengthen detention beyond 48 hours. I do not think that those arrangements remove fears about threats to, and the undermining of, the independence of the judiciary. It is a matter for regret that the Government have chosen not to create an independent commission for that purpose.

Those issues aside, I believe that much of the Bill represents steps in the right direction. I shall support it in principle tonight, with the single qualification that many hon Members are rightly concerned that the issue of defining terrorism might take us in the wrong direction.

7.30 pm

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I apologise for not having been present throughout the debate so far. I had a pressing commitment and gave my apologies to Madam Speaker.

Three weeks ago, I attended the anniversary service at Birmingham cathedral for the victims of the Birmingham bombings. I was struck by the horror and torment that relatives of the victims feel to this day: 25 years on, they still ask how such a terrible thing could have happened, why it was not prevented and why those responsible were never caught. Therefore, I recognise the need for legislation to curb the actions of fanatics and those lacking any respect for the democratic process. Those of us who believe in freedom and democracy know that we have to pay a price for protecting ourselves from anti-democratic terrorist elements. That price involves some restriction of our liberties, but a balance must be struck between our security and the sacrifice of our liberties.

We should welcome certain elements in the Bill, such as the general recognition of the need to co-operate with international partners to tackle the growing and unpredictable threat of terrorism. Like the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I welcome the scrapping of the internal exile provisions that were so unsatisfactory a feature of the prevention of terrorism Act. The Bill introduces good safeguards, such as the welcome role of the judiciary in determining extensions of detention beyond 48 hours. Further to that, I wonder why the judiciary is not also being given powers to authorise stop and search, and why that has been reserved to Ministers. I also welcome the sensible step of providing proscribed organisations with a right of appeal.

There is much in the Bill with which I feel comfortable, but, like many other right hon. and hon. Members, I have reservations about certain elements in the Bill, to the extent that I wonder whether we have got the balance right. I am struck by the many letters I have received from

constituents—ordinary people in Birmingham who have experienced horrible bombings—in which they make clear their belief that the Bill contains real threats to our freedoms. I am not convinced that the assurances given and safeguards offered so far are sufficient. Like the civil rights organisation Liberty, I wonder whether it can ever be right in principle for us to accept that those motivated by religious or ideological beliefs should have fewer rights and be made worse off than those who commit crimes motivated by malice, greed or revenge.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), I am happy with the current Home Secretary and his ministerial team: I have great faith in them and believe that they genuinely want to preserve our freedoms and protect democracy. I have no concerns about them, but I am conscious that ministerial teams change. I recall one Prime Minister who thought that there was an enemy within—organised labour. What would have happened to the miners and their families, or to the women at Greenham Common, if the legislation before us had been in effect when they opposed the Government of the day?

The Home Secretary said in a recent article in *The Guardian* that we should not be concerned about the "Mandela effect"—the notion that if the powers in the Bill had been in effect earlier, we would have been unable to support the ANC. However, the ANC had an armed wing, as does the National Council of Resistance in Iran—an organisation which was once regarded as a great friend of the British Labour party. The council is dedicated to ending a regime in Teheran that is regarded as being wholly tyrannical and anti-democratic, even though it claims to have democratic legitimacy. I am to meet representatives of that organisation tomorrow, but, by associating with such people and supporting their cause, am I risking sooner or later becoming guilty of an offence under this legislation?

I am also worried about the provisions relating to the threat of serious violence. Recently, it became apparent that the Chinese President and his security people believe that what we would regard as legitimate protest can be construed as a threat of serious violence. What would be our response if people who shared the views of the Chinese started to put pressure on us?

Clause 55 makes one guilty of an offence if one is in possession or is associated with an article that the authorities believe is connected with terrorism. How does one prove one's innocence in those circumstances? That an article appears, one is associated with it or accused of being associated with it, and one is therefore guilty, all sounds rather Kafkaesque to me. Clause 56 makes it an offence to collect information that someone else might choose to use for terrorist purposes. Working as an investigative journalist in such a legal environment will be extremely difficult. Similarly, a person who is accused of holding information that might be useful to terrorists is guilty until he is able to prove his innocence.

I understand that it will also be an offence not to pass on a belief or suspicion in respect of terrorist activity. There is a massive streak of Big Brother in such a provision. Our judicial system will be stretched too far if holding a suspicion or a belief but not sharing it makes one liable to prosecution. My point is that all those provisions will severely restrict the actions of investigative journalists and have a serious impact on the freedom of the press. Instead of making our society more secure, the Bill might make it more secretive. That cannot be the intended outcome of legislation designed to protect us against terrorists.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be willing to address in Committee the genuine concerns that have been expressed today by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House. He should do his utmost to ensure that the final outcome is legislation that protects us from terrorism without attacking the very liberties and freedoms that guard a democratic society.

7.40 pm

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): As has already been said, the Ulster Unionists will be supporting the Bill tonight. We believe that it is important to continue to have legislation in the United Kingdom which provides for the continued threat of terrorism. I welcome the permanence that is now being given to legislation dealing with anti-terrorism. Sadly, terrorism is a permanent feature of the world in which we live.

In implementing the Bill, it is important that we recognise what has happened in the past. As flaws in previous legislation were sometimes exploited, it is important to ensure that new legislation is as accurate and fail-safe as possible.

It is true that I and others have expressed concerns about concessions that have been made under the Belfast agreement, not least the early release of terrorist prisoners. However, if we are truly drawing a line under all that, it is important that the Bill sends out a clear signal that terrorism will not be tolerated, whether it is in Northern Ireland or in any other part of the United Kingdom. Some terrorist organisations see the concessions that have been made by the Government in respect of the IRA, the UVF, the UDA and other terrorist organisations as signals that the Government are weakening their approach to terrorism. That must not be allowed to happen.

It is important that the House sends out a clear signal to all terrorist organisations that we will not tolerate terrorism in the United Kingdom. Parliament has a responsibility for ensuring the safety of all our citizens. Bearing in mind that the objective of terrorism and of terrorists is to terrify those citizens to apply pressure on the political process, we who are involved in that process have a responsibility and a duty to ensure that that is not allowed to happen, that we uphold the principles of democracy and that we do not give way to terrorism. That is why ending terrorism in Northern Ireland means not only an end to violence but to the threat of violence. I think that the Bill acknowledges that when it seeks to define terrorism as being not only the commission of an action that involves violence but the threat of such an action.

In political terms, the threat of violence and terrorism can be as potent as violence and terrorism themselves, as we have learned to our cost in Northern Ireland. That is why we have argued consistently for disarmament as a key element in ending terrorism. It is vital to removing the threat of violence. For as long as there are terrorist organisations that are fully armed, with their arsenals of weaponry intact, the threat of violence remains. That is why we will continue to press for disarmament. It is about removing the threat of violence from the political process in Northern Ireland.

The political representatives who now sit in the Executive of the government of Northern Ireland and who are linked to terrorist organisations must ensure that those

[Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson]

organisations remove the threat of violence by removing the arms that pose that threat. The sooner that happens, the sooner the threat of violence will be removed from society in Northern Ireland.

In my opinion, a terrorist organisation that remains armed and refuses to declare that its campaign of violence is ended should remain a proscribed organisation under the terms of the proposed legislation. I note that there is provision within it for de-proscription. However, in respect of the terrorist organisations that are operating in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom which are linked to politics in Northern Ireland, let us be clear that there will be no question of de-proscription until they have ended their violence for good and have fully disarmed in line with the objectives that are set out in the Belfast agreement. That is in line with the clearly defined principles established as part of the political process that are known as the Mitchell principles, which commit parties and organisations to non-violence in all its forms.

The Opposition spokesmen have made it clear that that must mean an end to so-called punishment attacks, for example. That is vital. We must not countenance violence by terrorist organisations in any form. Our objective must be to pursue an end to all violence. Unless that happens and unless disarmament takes place and is complete, the Government should not move to de-proscribe any of the terrorist organisations that are listed in schedule 2. To do so without disarmament and without an end to violence would be premature and wrong.

If an organisation fails to meet the requirement outlined in the agreement, set out by the Prime Minister on numerous occasions and established under the Mitchell principles, it should continue to be proscribed for the purposes of the proposed legislation.

I note the special provisions for Northern Ireland in part VII, which are time limited for five years. I am sure that we all hope that in five years' time such provisions will no longer be necessary. However, I urge the Government not to rule out the possibility of re-enacting the provisions in five years if that is necessary. It may be that the threat of terrorism will remain after that period. We know that organisations are operating in Northern Ireland on both sides which have not declared ceasefires, and therefore continue to pose a threat. They are in addition to the organisations that are on ceasefire, which equally pose a threat to peace in Northern Ireland because they have failed to renounce violence or decommission their illegal weapons.

Given the special provisions for Northern Ireland, it is necessary to mention the Diplock courts. In a perfect world, we would have trial by jury in Northern Ireland. However, the reality is that terrorism is pervasive; the terrorists continue to use intimidation against jurors to prevent justice from being applied. Again, I urge the Government not to act prematurely in ending the Diplock system. It is necessary to ensure that justice continues to be applied to the activities of terrorist organisations.

Let us not forget that terrorist organisations, even if some of them are on ceasefire, are still continuing with forms of violence and intimidation, along with their so-called mafioso-type criminal activities. It will be difficult to obtain convictions through jury trials against individuals who are members of these organisations who continue to engage in violent activities, whether criminal or terrorist. The Diplock court system should continue for the foreseeable future.

It is equally important that the Government should not act with indecent haste in removing the anti-terrorist security infrastructure. I know that the agreement envisaged a normalisation process, but that can take place only when we have normality, or when the threat of violence is significantly reduced and eventually removed. In proceeding with the so-called normalisation policy, I hope that the Government will bear in mind the need to protect people and not to drop their guard. I mention particularly the full-time reserve of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Royal Irish Regiment. If it is the Government's intention to withdraw troops from Northern Ireland, they must ensure that that regiment continues to have a role in supporting the police in their anti-terrorist activities. The regiment is locally recruited and locally based, so it is available if there is a sudden increase in terrorist violence in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Government will retain both the full-time and part-time elements of the regiment to support the police.

Despite the recommendations in the Patten report, I trust that the Government will not act prematurely to reduce the numbers of the full-time RUC reserve, which has played a vital role in supporting the regular police, not least in combating terrorism. It is important that the full-time reserve does not get a raw deal for the sake of political expediency, and that it is accorded proper respect and allowed to continue in its role as long as that is needed.

As the Chief Constable said, there must not be a premature down-sizing of the RUC as long as the threat of violence remains. There can be no doubt that the threat is still present in Northern Ireland. The Chief Constable has said on a number of occasions that the activities of dissident loyalist paramilitary organisations and of the republican terrorist organisations not on ceasefire give rise to concern, so we must not drop our guard now.

Clause 52 makes provision for dealing with training and recruitment in respect of terrorist organisations. As I understand it, subsection (1) makes it an offence to publish information useful for the purposes of manufacturing or using weapons for terrorism. That could include the publication of such information on the internet. That is a useful provision. May I suggest to the Government that it might be extended? My right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the leader of the Ulster Unionist party, has on a number of occasions made representations about the need to extend the provision for the admissibility of wire-tap evidence in terrorist trials.

It may be useful to extend the scope of the provision covering the publication of information on the internet to include wire-tap evidence. That would enable such evidence to be admissible in court to prove, for example, that someone had been involved in procuring weapons, recruiting people to a terrorist organisation, or the dissemination by telephone of information for the purposes of manufacturing or using weapons for terrorist purposes.

In conclusion, my constituents in Lagan Valley look forward to the day when terrorism is a thing of the past. We, like others in Northern Ireland, have had to live with the yoke of terrorism, the anti-terrorist infrastructure, and

the security measures that have been necessary to protect life. I commend the security forces, particularly the RUC and the Royal Irish Regiment, and their predecessors, the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Army, for their role in defending the community in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom.

We want to be free of the yoke of terrorism, and we want peace in Northern Ireland, but that must be real peace—not just the absence of violence, but the absence of the threat of violence. That must surely be the objective of all democrats and of the Government. The legislation is necessary, but we hope for the day when it will not be necessary. That day is some way off yet.

7.55 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Inevitably, I shall focus on the aspects of the Bill with which I disagree. There are a number of those, but I recognise the merit behind the Bill's general approach. I see great advantage in having one statute that consolidates or codifies—I do not use those terms in a technical sense—the law, so that one does not have to deal with various statutes.

It is good to introduce a Bill that brings together the relevant legislation. However, I am uneasy about the Bill's definition of "terrorism" and "terrorist". The definitions of terrorism in clause 1, and of a terrorist in clause 38, lie at the heart of the Bill. The reason is that the various powers, offences, duties and obligations that the Bill sets out are directed to the pursuit of terrorism and to the identity of the terrorist. I shall return to those obligations and offences, but I begin with the definitions.

The definition of terrorism goes far beyond the traditional definition. Historically and in previous enactments, we have essentially directed our attention to campaigns against the state, which have been defined in various statutory language. As was appropriately said from the Government Benches, the Bill includes attacks on the corporate estate, which is an extraordinary departure in our concept of terrorism.

The definition of terrorism that appears in clause 1 includes the use of the threat of serious violence against persons or property. In my remarks, I shall focus on serious violence against property. What do we mean by that? The Home Secretary was right: he cannot give an absolute definition. However, we can be sure that the courts will attach a meaning to "serious violence". I shall suggest some activities which, in all probability, do constitute serious violence.

If I were a supporter of Greenpeace, which I am not, or of Friends of the Earth, which I am not, and I had it in mind to grub up a field of genetically modified crops or set fire to them, I would say that such an act was serious violence to property. It most certainly would be serious violence to persons if I were to knock a policeman about in the process of doing that.

If I supported animal liberation, which I do not, I would recognise that breaking open mink cages to release mink was an act of serious violence to property. If I wanted to interfere with the laboratories of research stations and decided to smash my way in and release the animals, that would be a serious act of violence to property. Those are not speculative acts—all of them have happened frequently. For example, the hunt saboteurs—a particularly disagreeable group of people—threaten serious violence to property. Incidentally, they threaten serious violence to individuals as well.

I strongly disapprove of all those characters, and I am glad to say that existing criminal law covers, in almost every respect, their activities. However, if I ask myself whether they should be treated as terrorists, I am bound to say, no way. Why not? Let us consider some of the consequences that attach to an activity that falls within the scope of terrorism; or, for that matter, let us consider what happens to activities that are connected with individuals who fall within the definition of a terrorist.

First, there is the power of proscription. The Home Secretary can tell Greenpeace or the Animal Liberation Front, for instance, "Because you are associated with what are clearly acts of terrorism, I am entitled to proscribe you"—and he is so entitled, according to the Bill. What is the right of appeal? We are told, in short order, that there is such a right, but that is rubbish. What there is, is a commission. Is the commission to review the merits of proscription? Oh, no—under the Bill, the commission must decide whether, in accordance with the principles of judicial review, the exercise has been carried out properly. That is entirely different. That is one of my less important objections to the Bill, but it is certainly an objection.

Anyone who pursues an activity that comes within the scope of clause 1 can be proscribed by the Home Secretary, with no effective right of appeal. However, there are much more serious objections of a more practical character. Let us suppose that one of the organisations that could come within the scope of clause 1 wants to raise some money. Let us suppose that it asks for money, as it is bound to do: Greenpeace, the Animal Liberation Front and anti-abortion activists certainly do. Asking for money in connection with an activity that is capable of being terrorism is capable of constituting an offence, according to the Bill. Moreover, contributing money is an offence under clause 14. We should be very careful if we are feeling generous.

The Home Secretary says, "This is all artificial, because the Director of Public Prosecutions would never agree to a prosecution". That may be true, but what is the individual citizen to reckon in advance? Does he know Mr. Calvert-Smith as well as I do? Of course he does not. *[Interruption.]* Does the Home Secretary wish to intervene? I shall give way if he does. He clearly does not wish to, so I think that he is making my point.

The ordinary citizen will know only that his act is capable of constituting an offence; whether he is prosecuted will depend on the wisdom of the Director of Public Prosecutions. What will that individual do? He will feel that he cannot become involved in a democratic activity. Moreover, banks and accountants who happen to be handling the affairs of such organisations will probably be under a duty to make a disclosure, and will probably be deemed to have committed an offence if they do not do so. We are told that the Director of Public Prosecutions would never be so foolish as to authorise a prosecution, but can the banks and the accountants count on that? Will they not say, "As a result of an abundance of caution, we will make a disclosure"?

The issue goes even further. Clauses 23, 24 and 25 contain powers of seizure and forfeiture; clause 39 contains a power to arrest without warrant; clause 35 contains a power to exclude people from a designated

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area, and clause 41 contains a power to search premises and property. Generally speaking, all those powers are triggered by a reasonable ground for the belief that the organisation involved is embarking on acts of terrorism. Uncomfortable as this may be for Ministers, we have already established that the act of terrorism has been broadly defined by clause 1, and is capable of including many acts that no one in his right mind would consider to be acts against the state. That is thoroughly undesirable.

I want to draw attention to another power, which I think would be even more distressing for some Labour Members. It lies in clause 60, which states that an individual who had, for example, maintained an armed campaign against people whom we considered undesirable, and who then came to this country, would face prosecution. Let us be clear about this. Mr. Barzani and Mr. Talabari—whom the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the former Home Secretary, Lord Hurd and I met, and encouraged to wage war against Saddam Hussein in northern Iraq—were clearly doing things that came within the scope of clause 60. If they came to this country, they could be prosecuted. If they came to someone like me—a practising lawyer—and asked whether they could safely come to this country, I would have to tell them that, under this legislation, they could be prosecuted. I would add that whether they would be prosecuted would depend on the good sense of the Director of Public Prosecutions. That is a bizarre state of affairs, which is entirely wrong. As I have said, I do not approve of such activities, but I do not want to make them constitute terrorism.

That takes me to my second, related point, and here I draw on my experience of the Foreign Office. Clauses 1 and 57 include in the concept or definition of terrorism acts that are committed abroad. Let us take two recent examples. The Kosovo Liberation Army was engaged in a struggle against the Serbs in Kosovo. I do not want to discuss the merits of that, but what the KLA was doing certainly involved acts of violence against persons and property. Its acts constituted, or were capable of constituting, acts of terrorism within the terms of clause 1.

I used to meet the Kurds of northern Iraq on behalf of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. We positively encouraged them to try to throw Saddam Hussein out of the area. They were using force, and therefore fell within the scope of clauses 1 and 57. If they were to raise money in this country, as they did—indeed, the Government probably gave them money—that would constitute an offence under clause 14. Those are offences. The only consolation that we can offer those people is that they would not be prosecuted because of the provisions of clause 113, under which the DPP would not give his consent. I feel that this is a serious departure from the principles that we should be implementing in this country.

I do not intend to spend a lot of time discussing drafting points, because they are essentially Committee points. However, in passing, I have to say—and I have already told the Home Secretary—that one of the reasons against proscription is the absence of a right of appeal.

Another point relates to the powers of seizure of funds associated with terrorism. I have personal experience of that. About two years ago, I was operating in the courts of Dublin in relation to the Criminal Assets Bureau. This legislation is not very different from the Irish legislation in that regard. All that need happen is for a police constable to say that he has reasonable grounds to suppose that the cash is associated with terrorism, and he can then grab it and go along to a magistrates court which, if it is satisfied on similar grounds, will make a detention order. If the character whose money has been taken wants to get it back, the onus is on him to prove that the circumstances no longer exist. Those powers are capable of being misused, and powers that are capable of being misused will be misused. That is the nature of the beast.

I personally think that the Bill has revealed the structures under which civil liberties will be seriously curtailed. By extending the definition of terrorism, we put at risk our long tradition of giving sanctuary to people who are fighting oppressive regimes abroad. We put at risk the democratic right of people to protest. I may not approve of that protest—I frequently do not agree with protests—but I do not want protesters to be classified as terrorists.

Left to myself, I would probably divide the House on giving the Bill a Second Reading. However, there is not sufficient support for that, so I shall not do so. However, the Bill should be committed to a Special Standing Committee because it requires very careful consideration. If the Liberal Democrats move their motion, I shall support it. I hope that other hon. Members who are worried about civil liberties will do likewise.

8.10 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I shall restrict my comments to part VII, which deals with Northern Ireland. Any hon. Member who was involved in the recall of Parliament in September 1998 will not be surprised by the Bill's contents, which are consistent with events then. I remember spending 16 solid hours in the Chamber listening to exactly the same arguments, and over which hon. Members took similar positions.

The legislation that was passed then has not been used once since it became law. Governments are in the habit of worrying about the failings of human nature instead of celebrating its triumphs. That is slightly ironic because one of its great triumphs has occurred in Northern Ireland in the past few weeks. The extraordinary events there show that if we have faith in people and apply normal human law, we can make enormous progress.

The emergency provisions and prevention of terrorism Acts have been part of a messy process which has led us to our current position. They probably had an impact on our ability to reach that position, so it is no surprise that those measures are amalgamated in the Bill. That is part of the process of normalising the terrorism legislation that applies to Northern Ireland. We all agree that that needs to be done. It is not only the five-year limit that is crucial, but the fact that the provisions must be renewed every year, like previous measures. That means that they could cease to operate before the end of the five-year limit, which is all to the good.

Some hon. Members, few of whom are present, believe that even the time-limited Northern Ireland provisions are too much. I do not believe that because we need to make the change gradually, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said. For example, the role of the Diplock courts nowadays is much diminished compared with the time when they were established. However, we must be confident that we can get rid of them.

Placing the onus of proof on the accused for possession of firearms and explosives is a logical provision, given events in Northern Ireland during the past 30 years. The much-debated powers of search, seizure and arrest without a warrant, which clauses 79 to 93 cover, have always been controversial. We all want to see the back of those clauses over time—nevertheless, it is right to be cautious.

Some senior and authoritative sources question the need for continuing with separate proposals for Northern Ireland and ask why we cannot have one measure that covers the United Kingdom. One of the most eminent of those groups is the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which is an independent statutory body that was established under the Good Friday agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is the only commission of its kind in the United Kingdom, and probably in western Europe. It has a duty to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice in Northern Ireland on human rights. It takes a stronger view than mine—it believes that the Bill should not provide additional special powers exclusively for Northern Ireland, and that the measure should not extend the life of the current emergency provisions Act until it comes into force.

Professor Dickson, who is chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, is worried about the compatibility of the Bill with the European convention on human rights. Those points have already been made. I make the case not because I am convinced by it, but because we have to anticipate a profound dialogue in Committee to understand why people such as Professor Dickson feel so strongly. My views reflect those of the Ulster Unionist Members who spoke tonight. Change must be gradual.

I would be grateful if the Minister could give the House some idea of the amount of consultation that has already taken place with the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Government's plans as we progress towards Committee stage. It is important that the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly are seen to be directly involved in the process as we move forward. It is perhaps even more important for the public to understand why the Bill contains separate provisions for Northern Ireland as we move towards a normalised cultural and social society in Northern Ireland.

The fundamental question is, for how long will we need special provisions for Northern Ireland? Is there a way of balancing more quickly the needs of Northern Ireland with those of the rest of the United Kingdom? Given the breadth of views expressed in the Chamber tonight, the Northern Ireland provisions will constitute the Bill's key bone of contention. Those are good grounds for further discussion in Committee.

8.16 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I apologise for not being in the Chamber throughout the debate. I shall give the reason for that shortly, because it bears on the debate. I listened to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) and I totally agreed with him. I have written to the Government Chief Whip to say that I cannot support the Bill. I do not know whether there will be a vote, but I cannot support the measure for very personal reasons.

When I appeared in Trafalgar square in 1964 to support a well-known terrorist who had just been convicted in the Rivonia trial, would I have been guilty of terrorism under the Bill? The next time I met the man, he had a Nobel peace prize and was President of South Africa.

One of the reasons for my absence from the debate was that I was outside the Russian embassy, protesting against the bombing of Chechnya. The Russians argue that the people of Chechnya are terrorists. Would I be guilty of supporting terrorism for going to the Russian embassy to demand that the Russians stopped the bombing and that Chechnya be given the opportunity to determine its future? Doubtless, the Home Secretary can help me. It is no good people shaking their heads. According to the Russian Government—a de jure and a de facto Government—the people of Chechnya are terrorists.

Tomorrow morning, I shall be in the Middlesex court defending a woman who put some graffiti outside the House of Commons to protest against nuclear weapons. She is a very courageous woman. I am not allowed to mention her name because one cannot deal with sub judice cases, but I have known her for years. She was at Greenham common and I appeared for her in York when she opposed the Menwith camp. If we define damage to property as terrorism, that woman could be a terrorist.

The Bill is an outrageous measure. I have spoken to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). I could not believe that the Liberal Democrats would not vote against the Bill. I have enough Liberal blood in my veins to believe that this place is about civil liberties and democracy. The more the Government open themselves to the influences of international organisations and business, the more they clamp down on dissent in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) drew attention to that. I can imagine circumstances, which my hon. Friend also mentioned, involving, for example, genetically modified food, in which the Government crack down on opposition here and become increasingly open to the influence of Monsanto and other companies that interpret free trade as an opportunity to buy Governments.

I was in America this summer, celebrating my golden wedding, and I had breakfast with the World Affairs Council. A former Governor of Ohio said to me, "We'll never have democracy in America until we stop companies buying political parties." He was a Democrat—I suppose that he would be called an old Democrat in the language of today—and he pointed out that the American prison population is rising dramatically and that big companies pay the Democrats and the Republicans and expect a pay off, whoever wins.

These are big issues and I am terribly disappointed that a Government whom I support—I have always supported Labour Governments since joining the party in 1942—should be introducing a measure that would get a standing ovation at a Tory conference if a Tory Home Secretary proposed it. Every Conservative Member knows that the Bill is absolutely foreign to the conventions and traditions of the Labour party, which has always been in favour of trying to help people from other countries who have struggled for their independence against repressive Governments and which has always been sympathetic to the dissident because the dissident often turns out to be right. I do not know whether the suffragette who chained herself to the statue of Lord Falkland in St. Stephen's hall

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and broke the sword when she was pulled off would have been guilty of damage to property under the Bill. Might she have ended up in that category?

This is a thoroughly bad Bill. Although there will not be a vote against it, at least on the motion—

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Benn: Has the hon. Gentleman changed his mind on the vote on Second Reading?

Mr. Hughes: Although the right hon. Gentleman was unable to be present for my speech, he knows that severe criticisms of the Bill have been made from both sides of the House. Given that we cannot defeat it on Second Reading and therefore will go ahead, and because we want to debate the issues, I hope that he will accept that examining the evidence for the Government's case before we consider the Bill line by line is the best way to proceed.

Mr. Benn: We all know what the evidence is: the Home Secretary wants the Bill. There is no evidence for the change and we want a Committee of the whole House to debate every amendment because the Bill affects the civil liberties of the nation. Although any opportunity to enter the Lobby is attractive to the Liberal Democrats, perhaps they have settled everything in a Cabinet Committee with the Government, in which case I would not dream of tempting the hon. Gentleman away from his allies. I do not know about that, but the Bill should be dealt with by a Committee of the whole House. If such a motion were tabled we could consider it properly, but a Special Standing Committee seems to me to be an excuse for diverting attention from the major errors in the Bill.

Mr. Hughes: A Special Standing Committee is nothing to do with that. I think that it is within the right hon. Gentleman's power to table a motion to commit the Bill to a Committee of the whole House, if he wants to put that proposition to the House. Such a motion does not have to appear on the Order Paper. The House could consider the matter, we could vote on it and we could have a Committee of the whole House. I assure him that these issues certainly have not been debated in a Committee by my party and the Government.

Mr. Benn: It will be best if all the main points are put to the House on Report and we can vote on them. I have described my genuine—not nasty—disappointment that the Liberal Democrats, whom I had always thought of as okay on these matters, have turned out to be less clear than I had hoped. However, we cannot all follow the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, who made a powerful speech which I shall read again and again. His remarks reflected exactly what I think about the Bill.

8.23 pm

Audrey Wise (Preston): I shall be brief. Like some other hon. Members, I want to concentrate on the issue of serious violence committed against property. We all abhor terrorism and we are all afraid of it—I certainly am—but I have met people who have committed serious violence against property and against a Trident submarine. They were not terrorists and their motivation was not to frighten us but to save lives. They think that Trident submarines are a danger to all our lives, although their action may or may not have been appropriate. Speaking for myself, I prefer straightforward, mainstream political action—that is why I am a Member of the House—but those people were not terrorists. The women who broke into British Aerospace outside Preston and went at the Hawk aircraft with hammers did it to save lives—they were not terrorists.

There has been some discussion of clause 18, which has been described as a danger to investigative journalism because a person would be committing an offence if he did not disclose his belief or suspicion that, under the Bill's definition of terrorism, another person had committed an offence. Journalists may not be the only ones affected. I could foresee a situation in which I was told that someone had gone to do more damage to a Trident submarine. Would I be committing an offence if I did not immediately trot off to the Government and say, "I am informing on these people"? I would not dream of doing that. I might engage such people in a discussion about the best and most effective means of action, but inform on them? I certainly would not.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) made a powerful speech that was made even more powerful by his disagreement with most of the organisations that he used as examples. I have given money to Greenpeace and I support it. I am also a supporter of Genetix Snowball, and I gladly give it money when the opportunity arises; but those organisations commit offences against property.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Lady asks whether she would be committing an offence if a member of one of those organisations said to her that he had committed an offence or intended to do so and she did not tell the prosecuting authorities. She is much to be reassured because the Director of Public Prosecutions would not have her prosecuted, but she probably would be committing an offence.

Audrey Wise: I find it difficult to be reassured by reassurances because, like the right hon. and learned Gentleman, I believe in looking at what is in the Bill. I do not always understand the decisions of the DPP on ordinary criminal matters and I know for a fact that I am not the only Member who does not understand those decisions. Why should I expect to understand decisions made by successive Home Secretaries and successive Directors of Public Prosecutions? The important issue is what the Bill says, and it says that a person is a terrorist if he commits serious violence against property for ideological, political or religious reasons. The people I have referred to certainly acted for ideological and political reasons that were deeply moral.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Lady, who I think has listened to the whole debate, is not only right but right to warn the Government and the House of the danger of going down such a road. Under the Bill, the go-betweens involved in the discussions that took place in Northern Ireland over the past few years and who tried to

achieve the breakthrough to peace would have risked criminalisation. I hope that she is listened to because she realises the severity of the proposal.

Audrey Wise: I take the hon. Gentleman's point.

I very much hope that the Government listen to the points that have been raised. Nearly everyone who has spoken in the debate, with the possible exception of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), has criticised the Bill, but not out of any desire to support terrorism or terrorists—on the contrary.

It is indeed dangerous to define terrorism so widely that it could cover damage to genetically modified crops, as that would risk people losing their natural revulsion for terrorism and making them think, "Perhaps some terrorists are not so bad after all." I would not want to bring the law into disrepute in that way. I want people to detest terrorism, and we would not encourage them to do so by widening its definition.

Mr. Winnick: I do not think that my hon. Friend was in the Chamber when I intervened on my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. As someone who is broadly in favour of the measure and who believes that under no circumstances should Britain be used as a base for terrorism, I have serious reservations about those aspects of the Bill that could undermine civil liberties which, as my right hon. Friend said, is exactly what the terrorists want to do.

Audrey Wise: I saw my hon. Friend's intervention on the screen, and I agree with him.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who has a certain reputation for being willing to engage in serious discussion and listen to serious points—perhaps more than some of his colleagues—to justify that reputation in respect of the Bill. We do not want to make it seem as though there are divisions in the House in respect of terrorism. Indeed, there are not, but there certainly are divisions in respect of the Bill. I very much hope that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues will listen to the points that have been made from both sides of the House and from many different perspectives.

8.30 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Lord Lloyd of Berwick began his consideration of terrorism legislation in Britain by addressing whether there was still a need for specific legislation or whether instead we should rely on the general criminal law. Having studied the evidence and talked to those most closely involved in the fight against organised terrorism, he reached the firm conclusion that such legislation was still needed. I believe that the Government were right to accept that conclusion and to introduce the Bill.

Today's debate has included contributions from all parts of the House accepting that central proposition, although some right hon. and hon. Members expressed reservations about particular aspects of the Bill. The hon. Members for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) and for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) spoke from their long experience of dealing with the threat of terrorism in their constituencies, and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) spoke about the scars that the Birmingham bombing left in his constituency. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) spoke from experience derived from his stewardship of the Northern Ireland Office for some years.

Lord Lloyd concluded that the threat from organised terrorism is likely to grow in the near future rather than diminish. The hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) expressed some disappointment with the Government's conclusion that there was a need for permanent legislation. I welcome the fact that she supported my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) when she asked the Government to consider seriously the possibility of arranging for an annual report to be made to Parliament and for an annual debate to take place in each House about the exercise of the powers under the Bill, on the assumption that it becomes law. That proposal found favour in various political parties represented in the House, and I strongly urge the Home Secretary and the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), to take it seriously and to incorporate it into the Bill.

Several hon. Members considered whether, in the light of the improving political climate in Northern Ireland, there was still a need for special provisions for the Province. The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) expressed a strong view that special powers in respect of Northern Ireland were no longer needed. His view was countered by those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and the hon. Members for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, for Lagan Valley and for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik).

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, the Opposition accept that exclusion orders no longer serve a useful purpose, and we shall not oppose their formal repeal. It is certainly our hope that political progress in Northern Ireland succeeds in turning the Good Friday agreement into a genuine and lasting peace, but we are not yet in that position. Therefore, the Opposition endorse the Government's view that there remains a continuing need, at least for the time being, for specific provisions in respect of Northern Ireland.

Much of the debate has centred around the definition of terrorism in the Bill as it is currently drafted. Concerns have been expressed by some somewhat strange bedfellows: my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), the hon. Members for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), and—although he spoke in slightly less strident terms—my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter). Clearly, we shall need to look closely at the definition of terrorism when the House considers the Bill in Standing Committee and on Report, but it is important for us always to bear in mind the fact that the legislation has to strike a balance between civil liberties and the protection of the public, and that the threat to the safety and well-being of the British public from organised terrorism is real and continuing.

Let me deal with a couple of the points that have been made in the context of definitions. Reference was made, for example, to animal rights groups. Questions were asked as to whether people who supported particular demonstrations or causes that were connected with animal rights would fall within the definition of terrorism in the

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Bill. I hope to hear the Minister say in due course that of course those individuals would not be so categorised, but it is also right that people who are engaged with animal rights extremists to the extent of becoming involved in plotting acts of violence against their fellow citizens should be subject to the full rigour of anti-terrorism law.

Anyone who studies Professor Wilkinson's paper, published with Lord Lloyd's report, will see that there is a history of such incidents. They include firebomb attacks on stores in the mid-1980s; a high-explosive bomb attack on Bristol university in 1989; and car bomb attacks by animal rights extremists in 1990, one directed at a veterinary surgeon, a second at a psychologist. One of the attacks resulted in injuries to a 13-month-old baby. Those are not incidents that can be described simply as normal or legitimate political protest. They are acts of terror. The police and other authorities should have the powers that they need to investigate and to check such actions.

Comments have been made about the Bill's reference to serious violence to property. I have listened carefully to the points that have been made, especially those made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. We will want to explore the matter further in Committee, but there is another side to the argument. I understand from reading the consultation document that the Government wish to ensure that the law provides for adequate powers to be available in respect of attacks by organised terrorists that are designed to disrupt, for example, vital computer or other communications systems, which could result in extensive disruption to economic and other infrastructure. In effect, the Government have a duty to provide against economic blackmail.

Had the Bishopsgate bomb or the Arndale centre bomb in Manchester gone off with no loss of human life and no injuries, those would still have been acts of terrorism designed to intimidate British people and to force the British Government into action out of fear that, otherwise, further lives would be put at risk or major damage would be done to the normal way of life.

Other right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about the Bill's references to support for acts of terrorism, or alleged terrorism, overseas and to its provisions for extraterritorial jurisdiction. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater spoke about the difficulty of legislating for a spectrum of countries whose political regimes could range from those of France or Germany at one end to that of Iraq at the other. Much depends on the actions that might be classified as terrorist. Even the most robust critics of the Bill would accept without question that a random terrorist attack on innocent people in an authoritarian or totalitarian country was unacceptable.

Mr. Hogg: It is extremely difficult to tackle that definition. For example, if the Kurds in north Iraq decide to embark on a military campaign against Iraqis in that region, they might use artillery to shell villages. Such explosions would fall within the classification covered by clause 1, but are we really to say that people who support the Kurds in those circumstances should be treated as though they were aiding and abetting terrorists? That would be the effect of the Bill.

Mr. Lidington: I hope that the Minister will deal with that point in his concluding remarks. It is another matter for more detailed examination in Committee.

Mr. Maginnis: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves the point raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), does not he recognise that ordinary, conventional warfare conducted according to the Geneva convention is one thing, and that terrorism—which by and large picks on the weakest element in society to create terror—is another? Does not that difference apply to the example offered by the right hon. and learned Gentleman?

Mr. Lidington: The hon. Gentleman makes an effective point. As a country, we have agreed already that some offences—hijacking is the most high-profile example—are to be deplored and that they should be subject to criminal sanctions at an international level. That applies regardless of any sympathy that we might have for the motives of those who feel impelled to take such courses of action. I accept that these are not easy matters to define, but the Government, while preserving civil liberties, also have a clear duty to consider what measures are needed to protect the public from a genuine and serious threat.

Mr. Tom King: My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) is worried about the drafting difficulties of clause 1, but does not my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that we are able to deal with the problem of the extraterritorial organisation of terrorism? Such activity is deplored by all hon. Members.

Mr. Lidington: I agree completely with my right hon. Friend.

My only personal exposure to the immediate impact of terrorist action was at Brighton in October 1984. No Conservative Member who was there will ever forget the scenes. However, it is sobering for anyone with such vivid memories of Brighton to reflect on the experiences of people such as the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. He and his constituents have had to endure a campaign of vicious and relentless terrorism that lasted for decades.

So long as the threat to Britain from domestic and international terrorism remains, exceptional powers will be needed to enable the police and other authorities to deal effectively with it. That is why the Opposition will support the Government in seeking a Second Reading for the Bill.

8.45 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): We have had an interesting discussion this evening, which has accelerated in the past hour or so. I shall try to deal directly with some of the points made in the debate.

The Bill is predicated on the belief in the proposition that the threat of terrorism continues, and is still a force which exists today which must be dealt with.

In the light of some of the cuddly remarks made about animal liberation, which I was not going to address this evening, I will quote from Professor Paul Wilkinson's inquiry into legislation against terrorism—a document which is in the Library of the House, and which sets out the kind of threat about which we are talking. After dealing with nuclear smuggling and other attractive manifestations of terrorism, he goes on to refer to animal rights groups. The reports says:

"The majority of those involved in the animal welfare lobby keep firmly within the law and abhor violence."

That is their creed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Audrey Wise) has described.

"However, a cluster of small groups such as the so-called Justice Department of the Animal Liberation Front, and the Animal Rights Militia, have crossed the threshold from extra-parliamentary protest and demonstrations to what can only be described as acts of terrorism; incendiary attacks on shops and other premises and letter and parcel bombs. In 1990 animal rights extremists used car bombs in two attacks on scientists, one in Bristol and one in Porton Down. In the former case the scientist was unhurt, but a 13 month old baby was injured by shrapnel. There were major firebomb attacks against shops in Newport, Isle of Wight, York and Harrogate, in 1994. Millions of pounds worth of damage has been caused over the past few years alone.

There is continuing evidence that terrorist violence by animal rights extremists remains a threat in many parts of the country."

The report gives the example of police finding a bomb factory in the home of one activist, with material for 100 incendiary weapons and a list of potential targets. The target list included an agriculture college, slaughterhouses, the Milk Marketing Board, food manufacturers and horse breeders. The report states:

"It is clear that a campaign of this kind would have endangered life as well as property."

I commend the document to the House. We are dealing not with cuddly individuals or organisations, but with serious issues.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) referred to the global threat—the Japanese gas attack, the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and the continuing issues with some forces in Ireland. The reason for the Bill is that terrorism continues to exist, and we would be betraying our duty to the people who elected all of us if we did not make sure that we put in place a system of law to deal with those threats.

Mr. McDonnell: When will the criminal law apply, and when will this proposed legislation apply? My understanding of the Bill and its definitions is that it would apply to the Stop the City campaign, in which property was seriously damaged. Would it apply to those protesters in Seattle—as well as their supporters—where there was violence and damage to property and individuals? Would the Bill apply to those groups, or would they be subject to the criminal law?

Mr. Clarke: I assure my hon. Friend that I will address that point in detail, along with the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn).

I want to place on record that I welcome the support of the Opposition Front Bench, the Liberal Democrats and the Ulster Unionist party for the Second Reading of the Bill. I have sat throughout this debate—apart from a couple of very brief comfort breaks—and, according to the notes I have taken, about two thirds of those who have spoken support the Second Reading. There have been some serious issues on process and the question of the Special Standing Committee, but about two thirds have said that they support Second Reading. That is because they recognise that special measures are needed to protect the public and to work within the international framework.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: I will in a moment. I shall just deal with the important procedural points that have been raised. First, people have raised concerns about the Human Rights Act 1998, which they are perfectly entitled to do. However, it must be emphasised that my right hon. Friend's statement, which appears on the front of the Bill, was not made ill advisedly. The statement reads:

"In my view the provisions of the Terrorism Bill are compatible with the Convention rights."

I am not referring to my right hon. Friend's professional expertise, which is well known, but, on the basis of all the advice that we have had, the Bill is compatible with the 1998 Act—it would not have been drafted in this form were it not.

Mr. Corbyn: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Clarke: No. I will give way after I have dealt with the procedural points, first to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn).

Secondly, we do not favour using the Special Standing Committee procedure for the Bill. There has been extensive consultation on the provisions via the report of Lord Lloyd of Berwick in 1996 and the Government's consultation in December 1998, to which there were 80 responses. We published an analysis of the responses earlier today; copies of the responses can be made available if that would be helpful.

These provisions do not differ significantly from the proposals in the consultation paper. While some may be considered to be controversial, I do not view them as particularly difficult or technical. I therefore do not think that there is a need to adopt the Special Standing Committee procedure, as proposed by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, to whom I shall now give way.

Mr. Hughes: I understand the Government's position that there is widespread support for a Bill. But the view of many people who responded to the consultation was that either the Bill should not be extended beyond domestic legislation or that the definition as now proposed was not acceptable. The definition is different from that contained in Lord Lloyd's proposal—it has changed. Surely there is a case for hearing evidence and getting the measure right rather than pushing it through and then discovering that we have got it badly wrong.

Mr. Clarke: There is a case for a full debate on these matters. I shall indicate, as I go through the substance, the areas in which points have been made that need to be discussed very fully in the Standing Committee. However,

[Mr. Clarke]

that does not add up to an argument for a Special Standing Committee. I shall now give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North.

Mr. Corbyn: The Minister mentioned that the Home Secretary had given the authorisation for the Bill under the Human Rights Act 1998. The Bill contains provisions that allow detention without access to legal advice for 48 hours, the rights of invasion of privacy, powers of stop and search and the power to proscribe organisations operating in other countries which help people in this country. Does the Minister not believe that many of these will be tested in the European Court of Human Rights or under British law when the Bill is finally enacted? What will the Government do if the Bill is found to be inadequate in that respect? Will they accept the power of the European convention on human rights or try to legislate around it?

Mr. Clarke: I remind my hon. Friend and the House that it was this Government who decided to incorporate the convention into British law and establish these rights. As a result of that law, we must give our verdict on the front of the Bill as to whether we think that it complies with the convention. Our view is that it does. As my hon. Friend suggests, any decision that is raised may be tested through the judicial process. We shall have to consider that aspect as the Bill progresses.

That leads me to the third procedural point that I wish to make—Parliament's continued attention to the matter. A number of proposals have been made in the course of the debate, including renewal every Parliament, annual reports to Parliament and to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and scrutiny under the European convention on human rights, as mentioned by my hon. Friend. These are serious points and the Government take them seriously. We are prepared to discuss in Committee the best way of ensuring that the whole House can judge these matters as the Bill progresses and consider the best way to proceed.

There are a number of different views in this approach, and many hon. Members on both sides of the House have indicated the importance of Parliament having the continued right to scrutinise this effectively through the whole process. I am prepared to say that we shall return to the matter in Committee so that we may discuss the most effective way in which to proceed.

My fourth procedural point is that we are repealing the exclusion orders, something which several hon. Members have welcomed. That powerful and positive development should be welcomed on both sides of the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey has had a lot to say, but I shall give way to him once more.

Mr. Hughes: I accept that that is so. The Minister's comments on the possibility of reaching an agreement on reconsidering the Bill are welcome. We, and I hope the other parties, shall take seriously any all-party discussion on how any legislation can be opened to greater scrutiny in future.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful for that offer.

Let me turn to part VII, which deals with Northern Ireland, and which several hon. Members have mentioned. Our whole approach to this part of the Bill is part of a process in which all our colleagues in Northern Ireland have participated. The Government are prepared to remove part VII as soon as the assessed level of threat means that it is safe to do so. It is part of the process through which we have gone and to which both sides of the House are committed. We intend to be in tune with the process rather than being at odds with it. That is why the Bill has been introduced, and why we have dealt with these matters in this way.

Several hon. Members have gone over the history of their roles in the process in entertaining and sometimes informative style. I thank the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) for all that he has said and for the support that he has given to the leader of his party. He raised particular points about schedule 2 and proscribed organisations, and I can tell him that the Continuity IRA and the group that calls itself Uglaigh na hEireann—otherwise, the Real IRA—are proscribed by the general proscription of the Irish Republican Army in schedule 2.

The nub of the debate is the definition in part I. Several clarifications must be made for the sake of clarity. First, our definition does not threaten demonstrations and expressions of opinion. Secondly, contrary to the suggestions of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield, it was not inserted into the Bill at the behest of international corporate interests. Thirdly, the definition will threaten organisations that seek to prosecute ideological views by the threat of serious violence. That is our intention, because that is a dangerous area.

Insufficient attention has been given to one further point of the Bill. The threshold of the definition—not its breadth—is higher than was previously the case. The tests applied in the Bill involve "serious violence", endangering

"the life of any person"

or creating

"a serious risk to the health or safety of the public".

The test is not "any use of violence". Acts that intimidate the public but for which no qualifying motivation can be demonstrated are no longer caught by the Bill. As at present, no offence of terrorism is linked to the new definition. The major offences for which any terrorist may be charged—this answers the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell)—will, as at present, be criminal offences under the ordinary criminal law. Those include murder, conspiracy to cause explosions and so on.

The definition triggers extra powers for the police to prevent and investigate terrorist actions and threats, such as stop and search, the power to raise cordons and a special power of arrest. Special additional powers and offences are being introduced to thwart the establishment and continuance of terrorist groups, such as a power to proscribe and a bar on fundraising.

In light of some allegations that swirled around the Chamber earlier this evening, I want to make it clear that the new definition would not necessarily catch the actions of any domestic groups currently in existence. My right

hon. Friend the Home Secretary has no plans at present to proscribe any domestic group. Circumstances may of course change, and it is right that we should have the flexibility to respond if they do. However, if groups do not engage in serious violence—to the best of my knowledge and that of my right hon. Friend, most do not—the new definition cannot catch them. For example, peaceful demonstrations or strikes could not be caught. That clarification is important for the whole process.

I acknowledge that the question of definition is a real issue, as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater pointed out. Serious proposals have been made on both sides of the House as to how we should deal with that question. Opposition Front-Bench Members offered to introduce a series of probing amendments in Committee; I look forward to them. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South suggested an alternative definition, which he felt would be more appropriate than the one in the Bill.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Bridgwater that we need to find the difficult balance between the additional powers under the Bill and the additional safeguards and responsibilities that attach to it. Definition is important and the balance of judgment is difficult. We shall debate the various issues that arise from that in Committee. I am fully ready to explore those matters in Committee, as long as we do not water down one of the critical commitments of the Bill—to deal with terrorism in the most effective way.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): If my hon. Friend is not prepared to accept the amendment to create a Special Standing Committee, which I regret, given that the principal Opposition are not against the Bill will he ensure that the Government Members on the Standing Committee include some of those who have expressed concerns about the Bill and who will engage in vigorous discussions on the points that he has just raised?

Mr. Clarke: One of the great tragedies of my life—hitherto I have not shared it with the House—is that I have never been a Whip and thus am not entirely privy to the processes of the Committee of Selection. However, I am sure that that mysterious group—whoever they are—will have heard what my hon. Friend said.

Proscribed organisations are dealt with under part II, and there is a specific definition. There is an appeals process—to the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission—as set out by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. We acknowledge that the power to proscribe is an extreme and significant one. The groups currently listed in schedule 2 are Irish organisations that are already proscribed under existing legislation. We are considering which international groups it might be appropriate to add, taking into account such factors as the nature and scale of the group's activities, the specific threat that they pose to UK and British nationals abroad, the extent of their presence in the UK, and the need to support other members of the international community in the global fight against terrorism. However, I emphasise that proscription is a heavy power; it will be used only when absolutely necessary. It is part of the balance that I mentioned earlier.

Mr. McDonnell: I accept the Minister's assurance on this Government's exercise of proscription as a final power. However, I offer a concrete example. Let us take part I and part II together, under a definition of an organisation as terrorist—an organisation that has an "ideological cause" and perpetrates

"serious violence against any person or property".

Almost every organisation that demonstrated in Seattle was involved in serious crime against persons or property. Major mayhem was caused in that city. Many of those organisations were from this country and were funded by individuals from this country, and could be subject to proscription under parts I and II—could they not?

Mr. Clarke: Any organisation that focuses on the courses of activity defined in clause 1 is potentially subject to proscription. That is clearly set out in the Bill. My hon. Friend's point about funds relates to my next point on terrorist property and the concerns expressed about clauses 14 and 18.

In relation to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South on clause 14, it is not true that those giving money to an organisation—some of whose actions may come under the clause 1 definition—will necessarily commit offences under part III. People who give such money would have to know, or have reasonable cause to suspect, that the donation would be used for the purposes of terrorism. There needs to be a much more direct link between a donation and its likely end purpose than my hon. Friend suggested in his intervention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) raised a serious and important point on clause 18. I emphasise strongly that the fundraising and money-laundering systems are massively important in fostering and strengthening terrorist organisations. I have become fully aware of that fact only since taking on my present job in the summer. I had read about Noraid and so on, but I had not appreciated the extent to which that is the case. It is also the case in some of the areas of crime that the Bill does not cover. The money-laundering system is a key element in the support for such organisations. That is why we need to address, and why the clause addresses, the ways in which we target those people.

As many hon. Members have suggested, it is important to get the balance right; but it is also crucial to target the fundraising, which is the life-blood of such organisations. That includes telling professional advisers—as we do in the Bill—to take seriously their responsibilities in that regard. Two months ago, I was at a G8 conference on organised crime. The key question that was being discussed throughout the world was how to ensure that people who know that the proceeds of fundraising will be used to support terrorism live up to their responsibilities. That is a large part of the motivation for the relevant clauses in the Bill.

Mr. Maginnis: Given the problems that the Serious Fraud Office has had over the years, huge resources will be needed to take action on the provision of finance to terrorist operations from apparently legitimate sources. Are the Government now prepared to say that those resources will be made available to tackle the problem that the Minister has defined?

Mr. Clarke: I am not prepared to make a statement to the House tonight, but I am prepared to say that we

[Mr. Clarke]

absolutely take the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. Proposals for new legislation are under consideration, and we are studying the resources issues that will be involved because extremely substantial issues are involved.

In response to the specific argument made by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough, I want to make it clear that although I do believe that people who, in the course of their work, come across information about terrorist fundraising should pass it on, there is in the Bill a defence of reasonable excuse, which is an important qualification. We have also dropped the broader provision in section 18 of the PTA that any suspicion of terrorist activity acquired in any circumstances must be passed on, or an offence is committed. We have substantially tightened the provision.

I am prepared to consider in Committee the detail of the various wordings of which there was criticism, from wherever that criticism came. The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone was worried that the definition of terrorism in clause 1 might be too loose, and he also drew attention to other issues. Those need to be debated in Committee.

My penultimate point is on the question of detention and whether it should be dealt with by the Executive or the judiciary. We have fulfilled our commitments in that area. We believe that the judiciary approach is modelled in ordinary criminal law. Hon. Members from both sides of the House have spoken on that subject, and no doubt it will be fully debated, but the Government believe that it is an effective, positive and progressive change to give the judiciary power to deal with these matters.

Finally, I turn to the question of incitement and overseas activity, mentioned by several of my right hon. and hon. Friends. First, I want to quote from clause 57(1):

"A person commits an offence if he incites another person to commit an act of terrorism wholly or partly outside the United Kingdom".

I emphasise the word "incites". It is important to send a strong message to extremists that incitement in this country to terrorism anywhere overseas is unacceptable. In tandem with other parts of the Bill, those provisions demonstrate our commitment to change the climate in which people seek to operate in this country. We want to deter the encouragement of terrorist activities and to offer a basis for enforcement action that is necessary in the various circumstances that arise.

Mr. Corbyn *rose—*

Mr. Alan Simpson *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I shall give way in a second, but first I shall answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield.

In the case of the Rivonia trial, the answer is no—there would not have been an offence against the Bill. One could consider whole areas. The aim is to stop the incitement of specific terrorist activities.

Mr. Corbyn *rose—*

Mr. Simpson *rose—*

Mr. Winnick *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I give way, for the final time, to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North.

Mr. Corbyn: If a person organises a meeting in solidarity with an organisation in another country that is attempting to overthrow the Government of that country by violent means, is that person guilty of an offence? Are the supporters of that organisation guilty of an offence? Are the people funding it or attending the meeting guilty of an offence? It seems to me that they could well be adjudged to be supporters of terrorist acts even if the regime that they were trying to overthrow was a totally evil and repressive regime, but had since named its opponents as terrorists.

Mr. Clarke: Prima facie, the answer is no. I cannot judge specific cases; that will be a matter for the courts to determine according to particular circumstances. The short answer is that support for solidarity action, international campaign organisations or whatever will not be an offence in the context that we are talking about.

I want to emphasise that clauses 60 and 61 will enable the United Kingdom to ratify the United Nations convention on the suppression of terrorist bombings and, therefore, to meet our international obligations. Clauses 57 to 59 will essentially fill in the remaining gaps in the law to ensure that where offences are committed anywhere in the world, they can brought before our courts—and quite rightly so.

Mr. Winnick: Does my hon. Friend remember that when terrorist atrocities occurred in Egypt involving British citizens, the Egyptians asked why Britain allowed this country to be used as a base for terrorist purposes? Whether we did or not—it would have been unknown to the Government of the day—is it not important that we send the message that Britain will under no circumstances be used as a base for terrorist activities? Otherwise, we shall be in no position to lecture other countries.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point, which applies not only to the Egyptian case but to a variety of others in which it is important that we send our message clearly.

Mr. Tony Benn: Let us consider the case of Sandline. It overthrew a de facto—not a de jure—Government and the Foreign Office seemed to be involved in that from the beginning. What is the position on that? We cannot be asked to give even a Second Reading to a Bill in which the lines of definition are so blurred that they are very dangerous.

Mr. Clarke: My right hon. Friend was a member of the Government who in 1978 passed the legislation that deals with such circumstances. It is important to say that it not possible to give prima facie judgments on all the issues as they arise, but we must establish a proper framework.

The Government believe that every act of terrorism is a uniquely cowardly and barbaric crime. The Bill responds to the need for specific powers, ensures that the United Kingdom takes a tough stance, provides a new permanent legal framework and gets the balance right. I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to energetic and interesting discussions in Committee on the various issues before us.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63(2),

That the Bill be committed to a Special Standing Committee.—[*Mr. Simon Hughes.*]

The House divided: Ayes 47, Noes 262.

Division No. 19] **[9.13 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McDonnell, John
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Swinney, John
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil
Wise, Audrey

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bennett, Andrew F
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Follett, Barbara
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Maginnis, Ken
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha

Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thompson, William
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Don Touhig.

Question accordingly negatived.

Bill committed to a Standing Committee.

TERRORISM BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Terrorism Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure of a Minister of the Crown under or by virtue of the Act,

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in sums payable out of money provided by Parliament under any other enactment, and

(3) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Value Added Tax

That the Value Added Tax (Input Tax) (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 1999 (S.I., 1999, No. 3118), dated 19th November 1999, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22nd November, be approved.

Rating and Valuation

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Chargeable Amounts) (England) Regulations 1999, which were laid before this House on 25th November, be approved.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Question agreed to.

SECTION 5 OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (AMENDMENT) ACT 1993

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to the Order [7 December] and Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

That this House takes note with approval of the Government's assessment as set out in the Financial Statement and Budget Report 1999–2000, the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1999–2000 and the Pre-Budget Report 1999 for the purposes of section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Question agreed to.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Sessional Orders [25th October 1999] relating to Thursday sittings and Meetings of standing committees and the Sessional Order [24th May 1999] relating to Sittings in Westminster Hall shall apply to times of sitting on Tuesday 21st December as if that day were a Thursday.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

9.26 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Properly, but slightly unusually, the House is requested to treat one day as though it were another. In normal circumstances that may seem odd, but it is even more peculiar at this stage of the Session and at this hour, because it does not appear to me that the House is particularly hard pressed in terms of the time that it has available to consider the business that is before it. As usual in these circumstances, we have not had the courtesy of an explanation from the business managers. It always seems to me—*[Interruption.]* Is the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) trying to intervene? No, he is not.

The difficulty that the House faces—regrettably it is not unusual in these circumstances—is that a motion on the Order Paper is asking us to do something rather unusual, but we have not had the courtesy of any explanation. This gives me cause for curiosity and suspicion. We are getting all too accustomed, are we not, to the process whereby motions of this sort are put on the Order Paper on the assumption that they will be nodded through so that someone, I know not who, can have his way? The Government should be prepared to provide a brief explanation of what is behind such a motion. The House deserves—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. There are general conversations throughout the Chamber. Those hon. Members who do not want to hear the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) should leave the Chamber and let him continue.

Mr. Forth: We are therefore left to speculate, and speculation often takes a little time. Without any guidance or help, it is difficult to come to a ready conclusion on something as opaque and enigmatic as the motion before us. It states:

"That the Sessional Orders [25th October 1999] relating to Thursday sittings and Meetings of standing committees and the Sessional Order [24th May 1999] relating to Sittings in Westminster Hall shall apply to times of sitting on Tuesday 21st December as if that day were a Thursday."

We are being asked to accept that we treat a Tuesday as though it were a Thursday. That seems rather odd to me. You will know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it is proposed that next Tuesday is the last day on which the House will sit before Christmas. That suggests to me that there is no particular pressure on time that day. Yet as I read the motion, we are being asked to compress the business for that day to make it as though it were a Thursday. The assumption increasingly made in the House is that all the business must be compressed for the convenience of hon. Members. The motion suggests that that should apply even on a Tuesday, even though it is the last day before the recess. That surely deserves some explanation. That is not an unreasonable request.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it not gravely discourteous to the House for the Opposition to clear their Front Bench during an extremely important debate? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Whether any hon. Members care to stay and listen to debates in the Chamber is entirely a matter for them.

Mr. Forth: It is pleasing that the motion is being treated with such seriousness by the House, as is signified by the unusually large attendance. That pleases me and I expect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it pleases you as well.

Let us get back to the serious business at hand. Several different things have been gathered together on one occasion. We have a mystery that has yet to be resolved, about what has given rise to this rather unusual motion. More distressing to me is the fact that, yet again, we are considering a proper item of business, which is debatable because the earlier business has come to an end gratifyingly early, yet no one is prepared to do the House the courtesy of coming to explain what is behind the motion.

Surely that is another example of arrogance on the part of the business managers, who obviously expect to get their way without debate, without consideration, and without even the briefest explanation of what lies behind the motion. I suspect, but I am only guessing, that the explanation behind the motion is simple. There is probably nothing particularly devious, complicated or mysterious about it. I say that because I am a simple sort of chap, and I always look for the obvious explanation.

There may, however, be something much more sinister lying behind it. I would not expect the business managers necessarily to admit that, but it is surely not unreasonable to request a decent explanation of what lies behind the motion. That applies to subsequent motions as well, as they are all, happily, debatable until 10 pm. I am sure that the House will want to seize the opportunity with both hands.

Please can the House have an explanation of what lies behind motion 7, in order that the House may make up its mind on whether it wishes to approve the item. That is the old-fashioned way in which we go about our business—or so I thought until the idea seemed to gather pace that we do not even bother to debate matters any more. As far as I can see, many hon. Members would prefer that we did not bother voting on them, either. That may seem satisfactory—*[Interruption.]* If hon. Members want a Division, I shall see whether I can arrange one. It seems that there is a groundswell of demand for a Division, so that hon. Members present can express their point of view. I should like to give them that opportunity, if I possibly can. I have some doubt about that, but we shall put it to the test in a moment.

My request is this: can we please have the briefest of explanations about what lies behind motion 7, so that we can move on to the next business?

9.34 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The motion is straightforward, and I hope that I shall not detain the House long. It is a matter for debate, and I am happy to assure hon. Members that no mystery surrounds the motion. I hope that hon.

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

Members on both sides of the House will accept that it has been tabled for the convenience of the House and support it.

The motion has been discussed through the usual channels. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) will remember that it was raised in business questions last week, and a request was made that we should follow a well-established precedent that before a recess there is an opportunity for the House to rise relatively early.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, in effect the motion makes next Tuesday next Thursday, and therefore varies the sittings of the House and of Westminster Hall. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that that means no loss of time in the Chamber.

Mr. Forth *rose—*

Mr. Tipping: The right hon. Gentleman asked for a brief explanation, and I know that others wish to speak.

The motion will not lead to any loss of time. It will give Members an opportunity to leave a little early on Tuesday. I hope that Members will support that; I know that the staff of the House will. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Sessional Orders [25th October 1999] relating to Thursday sittings and Meetings of standing committees and the Sessional Order [24th May 1999] relating to Sittings in Westminster Hall shall apply to times of sitting on Tuesday 21st December as if that day were a Thursday.

Consolidated Fund Bill

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day, and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills) shall apply.—[*Mr. Robert Ainsworth.*]

9.36 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It seems, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that yet again no one has sought to catch your eye with the intention of explaining a motion.

Rather worryingly, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council has just expounded a new doctrine—at least, I think that it is a new doctrine. It seems to be along the following lines: if something called "the usual channels" agrees to a measure, it need not be debated in the House, and it is assumed that the House must automatically accept it. I think that that was the tenor and the substance of what the Minister said.

If that is so, it lays bare for the first time, and in a graphic way, the new philosophy that has been adopted by the Government in the House of Commons that a quick fix behind the scenes by self-appointed people is sufficient for the conducting of our business. I do not accept that doctrine for a minute, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I hope that you—a renowned custodian of the rights of the House and of Back Benchers—do not wish to accept it either. It borders on the sinister; yet the Minister deemed it to be sufficient and adequate to satisfy me, and any others who might share my worries, that we should proceed to the next business.

The Minister said, rather complacently, that the proposal had been agreed through the usual channels, so what was all the fuss about? I will tell the House what the fuss is about: it is about not just the motion that we are discussing, but all the subsequent motions, in the context of the dramatic new doctrine that has been revealed to the House. That doctrine states "Do not bother with debates or votes; the usual channels"—whoever they may be—"have fixed it all up, and that's your lot". That seems to be the basis on which we are now expected to conduct parliamentary business. It may be good enough for the majority of Members, but right now it is not good enough for me.

Let us examine the motion in a little more detail. It is an important motion; if anything, it is even more important than the previous one, which was intended for the convenience of Members. That is what we were told, and it was deemed to be a sufficient explanation. It is, of course, a seductive argument: there will not be much opposition to a proposal that is intended to be for the convenience of Members. You will have observed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I did not after all seek to divide the House on that motion.

This motion, however, is altogether different. It deals with the Consolidated Fund, which is crucial to the relationship between the House and the Executive. The Consolidated Fund Bill is a key part, and one of the most historic elements, of our parliamentary democracy, and of the relationship between the House—as the provider of funds—and the Government of the day. I hope that there will be no suggestion that the House would want to skimp, or to deny itself the fullest possible opportunities to debate the Consolidated Fund in detail and at length.

I want to try to untangle the wording of the motion. It demands:

"That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Funds Bills) shall apply."

To help the House, I shall quote Standing Order No. 56:

"When a motion shall have been made for the second reading of a Consolidated Fund or an Appropriation Bill, the question thereon shall be put forthwith, no order shall be made for the committal of the bill and the question for third reading shall be put forthwith; and the said questions may be decided at any hour, though opposed."

I begin to wonder what the motion is all about and what lies behind it. When I read the phrase,

"any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day",

I wonder whether, on a measure as crucial as the Consolidated Fund Bill, the House will have proper notice of what we are expected to approve. On a superficial reading, the motion appears to attempt to telescope the First and Second Readings. That would make it difficult for the House to give proper consideration to such an important and all-embracing measure.

The motion is worrying because it may constitute an attempt by the Government to slide a measure as crucial as the Consolidated Fund Bill through the House without proper consideration. We would usually expect a First Reading, which would give the House a general idea of the measure that we were being asked to approve. After some pause for consideration, Second Reading would be deliberated in the House and subsequent stages would then be tackled.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I am listening carefully to my right hon. Friend. He will remember that, a few years ago, all hon. Members regarded the Consolidated Fund Bill as such an important measure that they used to debate it for many hours, sometimes through the night, which allowed approximately a dozen hon. Members from each side to participate. Yet it is now regarded simply as an Order of the Day to be nodded through after 10 o'clock without debate. It is worrying that the most powerful Government in history want extra dictatorial powers over the Consolidated Fund Bill. Does not my right hon. Friend find it worrying?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who may wish to explore some of those thoughts further if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not want to be rushed; I believe that my right hon. Friend is trying to move me forward, but I am not quite ready for that. However, my right hon. Friend has helped me with the context, for which I am grateful. Perhaps I did not emphasise it sufficiently in my preamble; I rushed through my preliminary thoughts too quickly.

My right hon. Friend is right about the importance of the Consolidated Fund Bill—its scope, magnitude and the extent of the deliberations that the House gave it. In recent years, and especially since the Government achieved their massive majority, we have received increasingly fewer opportunities properly to consider those matters. The motion is a good example of that phenomenon.

There is plenty of time available and no need for matters to be rushed. The House is not even sitting on Friday. Although we are not pushed for time, we are ramming First and Second Readings of the important Consolidated Fund Bill together and not giving ourselves sufficient time for consideration in between those stages.

That would be bad enough, but Standing Order No. 56 not only confirms but multiplies my suspicions, because it refers to when

"a motion shall have been made for the second reading of a Consolidated Fund . . . Bill".

The motion states that

"any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read for the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day".

We are being asked to accept that First Reading becomes Second Reading as if by magic—without any due deliberation in between and just because the motion says so. It goes on—impudently, in my view—to invoke Standing Order No. 56—*[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) want to intervene? I thought that he had something to offer.

Mr. Maclean: He lost that years ago.

Mr. Forth: No, no. Knowing the hon. Gentleman, and admiring and respecting him as I do, I thought that he might have had a valuable contribution to make to these deliberations. As my thoughts unfold, I might be able to give him some ideas on which he may want to elaborate. I shall watch him out of the corner of my eye to see whether he might want to intervene. He is trying to put my off me stride—I can tell because he has a mischievous glint in his eye—but fortunately I have a copy of the Standing Orders in my hand. I am working my way gradually through Standing Order No. 56 and have reached the point at which it says,

"the question thereon shall be put forthwith".

[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] That gives the game away. It is obvious that Labour Members are no longer interested in proper debate or deliberation or votes in the House of Commons; they want to rush through business and go home. That, surely, is not the object of business. I thought that the House of Commons deliberated on these matters, held the Government to account and examined their proposals, but the Government themselves are suggesting that proceedings should be abbreviated and telescoped, that the Question should be put forthwith and that no order should be made for the committal of the Bill. Even the question for Third Reading will be put forthwith.

The combination of the motion and Standing Order No. 56, to which the motion refers, represents the astonishing revelation that the Government are suggesting that legislation as crucial and comprehensive as the Consolidated Fund Bill should go through First Reading, Second Reading and Third Reading all in one go. [HON. MEMBERS: "You have said that."] We are beginning—just beginning—to see the whole picture. The Bill will obviously not receive anything like the consideration in the House that it deserves, but it gets worse.

Standing Order No. 56 says that

"the question for third reading shall be put forthwith".

[Mr. Forth]

On the face of it, it appears that the House will be denied the opportunity properly to deliberate on this matter.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member of the House, particularly in these matters, but I think that he is starting to become a trifle repetitive.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall draw my remarks to a close—which is, I think, the guidance that you are giving me—in order, if nothing else, to provide the Minister with the opportunity to ease my concerns and explain what is at the moment inexplicable. I hope that he will give me the reassurance I want, which is that the Consolidated Fund Bill will indeed receive full and proper consideration in the House. If he cannot do that, the House may want to take its own view on the matter.

9.49 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I have a brief point on which to press the Minister. The motion refers to

"the sitting on Thursday 16th December"

and any Consolidated Fund Bill. I simply want to know whether he regards that as a precedent. Are there unique circumstances that determine that the Bill should be treated in such a unique and rather dictatorial manner on this occasion, or does he honestly think that a good precedent for parliamentary behaviour is being set that he may want to follow on future occasions? I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and I share all his concerns. In order not to tire the House, I shall not, unless pressed, repeat the arguments that my right hon. Friend presented in his admirable way, which I could not hope to emulate.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Get on with it.

Mr. Maclean: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman and to repeat the arguments of my right hon. Friend if the House has not heard them properly. However, I am tempted simply to repeat the question so that the Minister cannot dodge it or pretend—not that I am suggesting that he would—that he did not understand or hear the question. Is this a pattern for the future and will the Minister explain what is so unique about the sitting that the Consolidated Fund Bill must be dealt with in such a diabolical way?

9.51 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Motions 8 and 9 are linked, although they may be discussed and decided separately. I shall limit my remarks to motion 8. It will be for the convenience of the House, and it is not unprecedented, for the Consolidated Fund Bill to be dealt with in just one sitting. Both right hon. Gentlemen were Ministers in the previous Government—the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) was a Minister of State at the Department for Education and Employment and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) was a Minister of State at the Home Office. They asked whether today's procedure set a precedent. I can tell them that it does not—it follows one. It is exactly the same procedure as was used by the previous Government on 9 December 1994 and 6 December 1996. I hope that, on the understanding that no new precedent is being set, hon. Members will decide to accept the motion.

Finally, I have no objection to hon. Members exercising their rights, as they have done so tonight. There has been no collusion between the usual channels. Rights are coupled with responsibility and it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that we get our business.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, any Consolidated Fund Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time shall be proceeded with as if the Second Reading thereof stood as an Order of the day, and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills) shall apply.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any messages from the Lords shall have been received.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

9.54 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This motion comes under a slightly different category. I am grateful to the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office because, rather like the dance of the seven veils, he is revealing his and the Government's position slowly but intriguingly. We are now beginning to see the rationale behind their thinking on these matters. He told us in the previous debate that the usual channels had fixed things up. He tried to reassure us, but he had given the game away earlier. He has now told us—and this is the crux of the matter—that the Government must have their way and must get their business. You and I well understand that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because that is how our parliamentary democracy works in the House, but the Minister neglected to point out that, given their enormous majority, the Government will eventually get their way. However, it is surely important to the House that there are proper deliberations before the Government get their way.

I am increasingly worried that the Government seem to expect to move straight from what they propose to the disposition of that business without anything in between. The difference between us concerns whether we should judge whether Tuesdays should become Thursdays or whether Consolidated Fund Bills have their First, Second and Third Readings in the twinkling of an eye, whether or not there is a precedent for that.

I add in passing that the Government Deputy Chief Whip seemed to find it extremely amusing that I might seek to dissent from something that the Government of whom I had the honour to be a member had done before. All I say to him and to his colleagues is that the Prime Minister has changed his mind on the odd occasion—for example, between 1983, when he was a member of CND and wanted us to leave the European Union, and now.

I am accused of pursuing some unacceptable political position by being uneasy about what my own Government may have done in previous years, but I claim as an ally no less than the Prime Minister, who has exhibited an able method of changing his mind on some of the most key policies and has prospered as a result, but you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would not want me to pursue that matter because we are talking about motion 9, which relates to the business of the House.

The motion says:

"at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any messages from the Lords shall have been received. "

That strikes me as an intriguing and rather odd motion to bring before the House at this stage in the Session. One would normally expect such a motion—we are used to it—as we get to the end of a Session, when there is to-ing and fro-ing of Bills between the House of Commons and another place. That is normal. We saw it not that long ago, but what is genuinely intriguing is that the Government should want to have such a measure on the Order Paper and to have it approved by the House at this stage in the parliamentary Session.

That makes me wonder whether the Government have some secret and sinister ploy up their sleeve to spring on the House between now and Thursday 16 December. Why else would they want to make provision for messages coming from another place? It strikes me as rather odd and unusual.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I am listening carefully to my right hon. Friend. He is right to state that it is unusual to see such a motion on the Order Paper at such an early stage in the new parliamentary Session, but would it not have helped if the Minister had moved the motion, explained what it was about and what messages the House might expect to receive on Thursday 16 December from the other place? We should have been told that at the beginning of the debate. He is the responsible Minister.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is right, but the Government do not seem to have understood yet. If the Minister had done us the courtesy of a brief explanation in advance when you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, rose to announce the next item of business, it would have been helpful. He courteously and helpfully gave such an explanation on motions 7 and 8—I am grateful to him for that—and if he had done so on this motion, who knows? It might have reduced or, in some circumstances, even eliminated the need for the little debates that the House is now helpfully having.

Mr. Maclean: I am afraid that, on this occasion, my right hon. Friend is being too kind to the Minister. It is not a matter of it helping the House if the Minister had broken convention and explained the motion. That is not the argument. It is a motion in the Government's name and it asks the House to do something. Therefore, it is up to the Government to explain the motion—to move it, to tell the House what it is all about and then to ask the House to agree with it. It is ridiculous for anonymous Government Back Benchers—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We must not have shouting from sedentary positions in the debate.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was intervening on my right hon. Friend. I wish to be brief, but it is nonsensical for those on the Government Back Benches to suggest that, if I keep quiet, the Minister may explain matters in his winding-up speech. A motion that is moved by the Government should be explained by a Minister at the outset.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. In his helpful intervention, he pointed out that the motion is tabled in the name of none other than the Leader of the House. I have no criticism of the Leader of the House—

It being 10 o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

COMMITTEES

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to Committees.

Ordered,

EUROPEAN SECURITY

That Rosemary McKenna be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Mr. Patrick Hall be added to the Committee.

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

That Mr. Paul Truswell be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Christine Russell be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Animals (Government Policy Co-ordination)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

10 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I am grateful to the House for allowing me this opportunity to debate what is a very important issue. I am pleased that the rules of the House protect a slot such as this from the time-wasting piffle of the past 25 minutes.

In my office, we took side bets about which Minister would respond to this debate. I was successful in anticipating that it would be the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. However, that shows that there is considerable doubt, even among those interested in these matters, about who is co-ordinating animal policy for the Government—assuming that someone is. Had I known which Minister was to reply to the debate I would have given details of the points that I intended to raise. However, I hope that the Minister read my helpful article in the *Daily Express* today, in which I was particularly kind about him.

I wish to draw to the House's attention the lack of co-ordination between Departments on animal issues. I shall also query the Government's commitment to those issues, especially their use of private Member's Bills rather than Government Bills for legislation. Finally, I shall give credit where it is due for the steps that the Government have taken since they came to office.

I mentioned the lack of co-ordination between Departments. It is not clear whether animal issues are dealt with centrally or departmentally. The Home Office might deal with animal experiments, or hunting; the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions might deal with non-domestic wildlife, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food might deal with farm animals. The Department of Trade and Industry is interested in animal issues in connection with its negotiations with the World Trade Organisation. The Department of Health is interested in xenotransplantation and related matters. The regional Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also take an interest, while the Ministry of Defence has its own slaughterhouse in Aldershot and runs particularly nasty experiments at Porton Down. That list shows that the Government's response to animal issues is not co-ordinated.

The Minister may say that such criticism is all very well but that there is no problem because each Department knows what it is doing. However, last month I tabled a question on zoo licensing. My question was directed to the Home Office, but I received a letter from the parliamentary branch of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which stated:

"On further consideration the questions on Zoo Licensing that you tabled to the Home Department and which were subsequently transferred to this Department have been transferred back to the Home Department.

This was due to officials deciding, after the questions had been transferred, that the Home Department would be best placed to answer them."

That demonstrates that questions can rattle around between Departments, with no one certain about who is responsible. I am pleased that I identified the Department most likely to be able to answer my questions when I went to the Table Office, but the problem is not unusual.

On several occasions, I have drawn to the attention of the Prime Minister the need, because of the departmental spread of responsibility, to co-ordinate Government policy on animal issues. On 2 February, I tabled the following written question:

"To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to rationalise departmental responsibilities for animal issues to achieve better policy co-ordination."

The response from the Prime Minister was:

"Ministers with responsibilities for animal welfare are actively considering what new arrangements may be needed for interdepartmental co-ordination on animal welfare policies and their presentation. An announcement will be made as soon as possible."—[*Official Report*, 2 February 1998; Vol. 305, c. 476W.]

I asked a question pursuant to that on 22 June. The Prime Minister replied that an announcement would be made "as soon as possible". On 31 July 1998, I asked a question in relation to the performance and innovation unit of the Cabinet Office. The reply was that information about animal welfare would be announced "in the autumn".

In July 1999, I asked the Prime Minister why no announcement had yet been made in respect of the co-ordination within the Government of animal welfare policies, when he expected to make such an announcement and if he would make a statement. The right hon. Gentleman replied:

"To date, co-ordination between Government Departments has been on an informal basis. However, this will be put on a formal basis this autumn by the establishment of an Interdepartmental Ministerial Group."—[*Official Report*, 26 July 1999; Vol. 336, c. 29W.]

I then asked on 2 November if the group had been established, what its membership was and so on. I was told that work was under way and that an announcement would be made "shortly".

We have had five or six announcements from the Prime Minister—all promising action "as soon as possible" or "shortly". I am not yet aware of any action that has been taken. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten me.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) has now asked the Prime Minister about the interdepartmental ministerial group. The answer from the Prime Minister was that an announcement will be made "as soon as possible". We do not seem to have made much progress on co-ordination—despite the fact that the Prime Minister apparently recognises the need for it—in the two years since I raised the issue.

Given the wide spread of responsibilities and the commitment that the Labour party made before the election, this matter should be a priority. It stands out like a sore thumb as needing action. This is not joined-up government.

I am not the only one who is raising this issue. The RSPCA wrote to me this morning to say:

"Since the last general election the RSPCA has had dealings with ministers, and civil servants, from the Home Office, MAFF, DETR, DTI and the Welsh Office—adding up to over 15 Ministers. Of particular concern is the issue of dog legislation which covers MAFF, the Home Office and DETR, meaning that there is no one stop shop for owners, breeders, local authorities and animal charities."

I hope that the case has been proven that there is a need for more co-ordination. How can an animal welfare policy run smoothly and effectively if Departments do not know their respective responsibilities and are seen to be not co-ordinating?

I wish to query the Government's commitment to animal issues in a number of respects. My theory is that legislation on animal issues nearly always—there are exceptions, such as the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill this Session—seems to be relegated to Back-Bench Bills. There have been 12 such Bills over the previous two Sessions, only two of which have become law. Of course those Bills are easily sabotaged by Members such as those who contributed to the previous debates.

In particular, I wish to refer to the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill. On 28 November 1997, Members of this House voted by 411 to 151 in favour of that excellent Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), which was supported not simply by Members of this House but by the public at large. Even a poll in *The Daily Telegraph* showed that 78 per cent. of the public were opposed to fox hunting. However, the Bill was lost because Ministers insisted that it should be dealt with as a private Member's Bill. Many Bills that have support in this House are stopped and stymied as a consequence of that decision.

If Labour is committed to banning hunting—as it said in its pre-election literature—why is it insisting on using private Members' Bills? Why is animal legislation—unlike almost everything else in this House—dealt with predominately by private Members' Bills? Why is it not dealt with by Government legislation? I hope that the Bill on fur farming in this Session means that that trend has been broken.

I want to ask the Minister which of the pledges in Labour's pre-election document on the matter have been unmet. The document has a fox on the front, implying that we will have a ban on hunting this Parliament. If we do not, I should perhaps take up that matter wearing my consumer affairs hat.

The document says that Labour will ensure that animals are used only when it is essential for medical and other scientific requirements. Yet Home Office statistics indicate that although almost 2.7 million experiments were carried out on living creatures, only 468,000 were required to be carried out to comply with legislation. The others were not necessary. Can that be justified?

The Labour party also said:

"We will forbid the use of animals in the testing and development of weapons".

I admit that some progress has been made on animal experiments, and I will come to that, but some very unpleasant experiments are still being conducted. I refer in particular to those undertaken by the Ministry of Defence. I do not know how far it follows the same procedures as the Home Office.

The National Anti-Vivisection Society booklet dated May to August 1999 contains a description of a particularly nasty experiment with goats under water—undertaken with the consent, no doubt, of the Ministry of Defence or the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. The booklet says:

"Ten animals were suspended at 200ft for up to an hour before being brought rapidly to the surface. These were killed by lethal injection up to 15 minutes after showing severe reactions such as collapse and paralysis. Seven goats were compressed at 100 feet and held there for 55-60 minutes, then killed before being brought to the surface. None of the goats were anaesthetised during their ordeal."

This is an approved experiment which is still being carried out, for reasons which are at best dubious.

[Mr. Norman Baker]

I accept that the Government have increased the number of inspectors in this area—but only from 18 to 21, which is not a particularly large increase. The Labour leaflet also said:

"We will support a Royal Commission"

to look at animal experiments. Yet within two or three months of coming to office, the then Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) said:

"We do not consider that a royal commission on the use of animals in experiments is necessary at this time."—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1997; Vol. 297, c. 259.]

It did not take long for that pledge to disappear.

In an answer to a parliamentary question that I tabled, Ministry of Defence figures indicated that over-breeding of animals destined for experiments is running at about 80 to 85 per cent. Much more needs to be done about animal experimentation.

We know about the appalling cruelty inflicted on captive animals in the Mary Chipperfield case. We know from the parliamentary all-party animal welfare group of the loopholes in the law that allow circuses to be effectively exempt from the zoo licensing legislation, and the problems that occur as a consequence. We know that winter quarters are exempt. Yet there has been no Government action to deal with these problems.

The Labour document says:

"The conservatives have said that they would not ban live exports even if they could".

That is perfectly true, but it implies that the Labour party would ban them. The Government criticise other parties, but although they may have tightened up conditions on export, the trade continues. I am not saying that live exports can be banned, but that the pre-election leaflet contains a misleading statement.

Consumers should be given more information to enable them to make proper choices. I recently tabled a question on labelling, which was answered by the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I asked if the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food would prohibit the description "farm fresh eggs" from being used to describe those originally from battery systems. The answer, briefly, was no. Yet last Sunday the *Sunday Express* published a poll which showed that a quarter of those polled thought, wrongly, that farm fresh eggs meant free range, when normally it means eggs from battery hens—the very opposite of free range. Only 45 per cent. of those polled correctly said that the term meant nothing in particular. So the labelling is not effective in allowing people to make proper choices on grounds of animal welfare. The Government can and should sort that out; I cannot understand why they have not.

There are proven cases of abuse in animal sanctuaries. They are a legal loophole, effectively exempt from proper controls. No one who runs a sanctuary requires inspection or a licence. After I wrote to the Home Office to ask whether the Government would require operators of animal sanctuaries to be licensed, a Minister replied, to put it briefly, no. The RSPCA has highlighted the example of an animal sanctuary in Crewe where 140 dead or decomposing animals were found this year. Yet no crime had been committed, except under the Protection of Animals Act 1911, which provides a fall-back position.

Pet shops are also inadequately controlled by the Government. The RSPCA noted a record 68 cruelty convictions over the past year against pet shops. There were only 26 in the previous year. The RSPCA has called for tighter action. An article in *The Times* two weeks ago—my cuttings are all recent—was headlined "Pet chain staff brutally killed sick animals", and the Minister will be as horrified as I was by that. Tighter regulation is required.

I do not want to be entirely negative. The Government have taken steps, and they have tried hard on farm animals by pushing through controls on battery hens. The Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999 was a private Member's Bill that received their support. They have rightly maintained a hard line on whaling. They have acted correctly over animal experiments, and have pushed the sentient beings aspect of the treaty of Rome. They are also reducing fur farming, moving towards the end of lethal dose 50 testing and outlawing cosmetic testing and the use of certain species.

It would be wrong to say that the Government have done nothing. However, they have not lived up to the promises made in their own leaflet, which was well received before the election and which was written by the Minister himself. The action taken has been too little, too infrequent, too unimportant and too disjointed. If the Government would co-ordinate animal welfare policy better, we might have better and quicker legislation which would be to their credit.

10.17 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this issue and glad that the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) applied for his Adjournment debate. We need to set straight some issues, particularly concerning the hon. Gentleman's article in the *Daily Express*. His article was kind to me, and I appreciate that; however, it was the only thing that I appreciated in the article. I was appalled by the hon. Gentleman's tone as he accused the Government of a string of broken promises.

No Government have done more for animal welfare in such a short time. That is not only my opinion—the all-party associate group on animal welfare, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member and officer, takes that view. I am delighted that we have been joined for the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Mr. Cawsey), who does an excellent job of chairing the group. The group is considering several issues, and has produced reports on matters, including circuses, which are being considered by the Government. Animal experimentation is among the issues being considered by a wider group of people so that we can review the process.

The attitude expressed in the hon. Gentleman's article is part of what makes people cynical about politicians. It is easy to criticise, particularly when one is a member of a group such as the Liberal Democrats, who are in no position to deliver. I could also offer the gentle criticism that the Liberal Democrats are not unknown for saying one thing to one person and another to another.

The hon. Gentleman said that he had contributed to animal welfare by introducing a Bill on fur farming. He spoke critically, as though the Government had blocked that aim. We did block the Bill—because it would have

banned only the keeping of mink. Other animals, such as arctic foxes, are also kept for their fur. Indeed, that applies to a whole range of species. We blocked the Bill because it would not have worked; it was not up to the job.

The hon. Gentleman talked about co-ordination. He must know that when the Government considered introducing measures to ban fur farming, I invited him and representatives of other opposition parties to talk to me about how to advance matters. When he introduced his Bill, he did not talk to me about how it could be made workable. He, too, needs a few lessons in joined-up government.

I am extremely proud of the Labour leaflet to which the hon. Gentleman referred; no party has proposed as comprehensive a programme as that. However, that programme cannot be delivered overnight; it cannot be delivered in one year. Much of it depends on primary legislation, and the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the difficulties with that. Of the 30 key pledges in that leaflet, 19 have been implemented, eight are being implemented and only three are pending. That is a pretty good record for two and a half years.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the need for a committee to co-ordinate animal welfare policy. He knows as well as I do that no one Minister in the structure of the Government has overall responsibility for animal welfare; animal welfare is devolved across several Ministries. That is a problem for the Government. It is easy for the Opposition, because they need only one spokesperson to deal with that issue. However, we are considering the establishment of a committee to co-ordinate and overview the presentation of Government policy and to discuss such matters among ourselves. Ministers have already held such discussions. Each Department is working on the delivery of the pledges in that leaflet and on the improvements in animal welfare to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

I was also surprised that, in his *Daily Express* article, the hon. Gentleman stated that the Government had introduced no Bills on animal welfare. However, as he has just pointed out, the Queen's Speech included a Bill to ban fur farming. That is a radical step, which enjoys much popular support. I would have thought that he would have been aware of the measures on animal welfare in the Queen's Speech, but he made factual errors in his article.

When I read the article and heard the hon. Gentleman's speech this evening, I was reminded of the Monty Python sketch, "What have the Romans ever done for us?". The hon. Gentleman was saying something like that. He said, in effect, "What the Government are doing is disgraceful—apart from what they are doing on animal experimentation and on the treaty of Rome". Perhaps he would be interested to hear about some of the steps that the Government have taken in only two and half years.

Measures include changes to the treaty of Rome—to change the definition of animals as sentient beings. In fairness, the hon. Gentleman mentioned that. We have introduced a general directive on farm animal welfare—a UK initiative that applies throughout the European Union. We have promoted an agreement to phase out battery cages—another UK initiative in the Council of Ministers. We have introduced new welfare codes for sheep. Broiler hens are next on the list; new stocking densities will be among the forthcoming measures.

There will be new guidelines on the welfare of animals at markets and new training standards for those dealing with the transport and handling of livestock. We implemented the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 and led calls for welfare issues to be considered by the World Trade Organisation, including such matters as labelling. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that there should be international and national measures. We have introduced new standards of veterinary inspection for live exports and tighter regulations on such exports. We took the difficult step of refusing to approve journey plans for long-distance transport in the summer. Some of the incidents uncovered by Compassion in World Farming were quite outrageous, and we drew them to the attention of the Governments concerned. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government gave no approval for such journeys in such temperatures—nor shall we do so.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, we have introduced a Bill to ban fur farming. We have reached agreement on the banning of religious slaughter anywhere except in a licensed slaughterhouse—we are one of the few countries to do that—and we achieved it with the co-operation of religious minority groups. I am most grateful for their co-operation and hope to build on it in relation to similar welfare issues.

We supported a Bill to deal with puppy farms, as the hon. Gentleman noted. The UK promoted an initiative to ban drift nets on the high seas, where they kill dolphins. There is new protection for marine mammals in UK waters. Basking sharks are protected by CITES—the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Through the International Whaling Council, we have supported the ban on the use of electric lamps in whaling.

We sent a new circular to local authorities, reminding them of their powers to inspect and regulate circuses. We have increased resources to monitor and regulate animal experiments. We set up a forum to discuss animal experiments with non-governmental organisations, which was widely welcomed. We have banned the testing of cosmetics on animals—we are one of the few countries to do so. We have banned the use of great apes and dogs in testing. We have banned the lethal dose 50 test and tests on animals for tobacco, alcohol and weapons research.

I do not know the details about goats. I do know that some of the research is related to chemical warfare, which of course has implications for civilians as well as for the military. Sadly, it is the type of research that we must take seriously and, although we are always looking for alternatives, in some cases, at the moment, it is difficult to find alternatives to animals.

The Government drove forward agreement in the European Union on a zoo directive. We set up a zoo forum with all the organisations involved—welfare groups, vets and zoos—to raise standards in zoos. We have banned deer hunting on all Forestry Commission land. We have promised drafting support and Government time to ensure that if a Bill to ban hunting is passed on a free vote, it will have the chance to proceed. It is a private Member's Bill because we are committed to a free vote—I believe that, on such issues, it is absolutely right that there should be a free vote.

We have played a key role internationally, in the Council of Europe, on animal welfare, with some success. People look to us for a lead in the Convention on

[Mr. Elliot Morley]

International Trade in Endangered Species and in the International Whaling Commission, in which we argue for better international protection of endangered species. We are introducing a Bill to strengthen protection of wildlife sites and measures to implement biodiversity action plans.

So—apart from that, what have the Government done for animal welfare?

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I appreciate the genuine motivation of the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) in asking these questions, with no support whatever from the Conservative Benches. However, does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that it is a question not of "What have the Romans done for us?", but of "What have the Romans not done for us?" There is always more to do.

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Having gone through what I believe is an impressive record for two and a half years, I would not want to give the impression that we are complacent about what must be done. There is a great deal more to be done in our national legislation and in European legislation. I absolutely accept that, but we cannot do it overnight. However, this is action not words—we are delivering on the promises that we made about what we would do on animal welfare. I am very proud of our record, and I am more than pleased to stand on that record and defend it.

No Government in history have attempted to set up a committee for co-ordinating animal welfare policy. We believe that it is important because we want to make progress on animal welfare. We recognise that we have more to do and we do not want to let the momentum drop on animal welfare issues. Much work remains to be done.

The group is intended to draw together those Ministers who have particular responsibilities for animal welfare. Its purpose will be to oversee the animal welfare work of the different Departments and ensure that their activities contribute coherently to the broader Government strategy, thereby advancing animal welfare standards across all Departments. The Ministers concerned are from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Home Office. I pay tribute to my colleagues in those Departments for the work that they have been doing in pushing these issues forward.

The committee has already met twice, informally, to consider the practicalities. An announcement will be made as soon as arrangements have been made for the devolved Administrations to participate, because we want to involve them as well. If we are to have a national policy on animal welfare—and, of course, it is a national issue—the devolved Administrations should have a say. We want to involve them in the committee.

I very much hope that the hon. Member for Lewes—who, I accept, has a sincere interest in animal welfare—will reflect on what he has said and written, because it is unfair and does not acknowledge what the Government have done in delivering major animal welfare progress on several different fronts: nationally, in Europe and internationally. Even while we have been doing that, we have found time for Ministers to liaise informally more widely among themselves than has ever been the case.

We have a very good record. I stress that I am not complacent about it; I fully accept that there is more to do. I also accept that sometimes things move very slowly in Government, for all sorts of reasons—legal and procedural reasons and consultation with different bodies. The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind that we now have devolved Administrations. However, I can assure him that we shall make progress by setting up the co-ordinating committee. It is all part of our commitment to improving animal welfare and a record which, I would argue, no Government in history can equal.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 15 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister was asked—

Information Technology

1. **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): What steps she is taking to achieve full compatibility between the IT systems of Government Departments. [101542]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): Compatible IT systems can make a real difference to people. We are using the Government secure intranet to link up public servants. We are well advanced with the first phase pilot system to allow members of the public to notify Government of a change of address and we are publishing frameworks for call centres, websites, digital television, smartcards and authentication, which are the building blocks of a world-class Government IT environment.

Mr. Cousins: I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend has taken on the job of sorting out computers. The House recognises that he has the qualities and toughness needed to knock heads together and to get the job done right. However, we currently have two big computer systems—for the Inland Revenue and for the Contributions Agency—that were inherited from the previous Government; and we are commissioning new systems for Customs and Excise and for the Department of Social Security. The Government's objectives require all the systems to work together. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that that happens, with the result that we have joined-up computers as well as joined-up government?

Mr. McCartney: I give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance that the problems with the previous Government's legacy and the range of computer systems will be resolved. As important is that the Government are drawing up an IT strategy for the future that covers procurement, objectives, positive outcomes and value for money. When I answer Question 4 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) I shall set out more detail of that strategy. However, I assure the House that the quality and standards objectives of the current Government are greatly different from those of the previous Government.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): How does the Minister reconcile his IT policy with the fact that 11 of 17 Home Office IT projects are way behind schedule? Will he undertake, as a matter of principle and priority, to publish before the Christmas recess a list of all the IT projects currently under way in every Department and the success rate of those projects, including how many are late and how many are on time?

Mr. McCartney: I thought that the hon. Gentleman might have risen to apologise for the legacy of the previous Government. Their approach to IT procurement was shambolic: no Minister took any interest in the projects, in delays, in safeguarding the public purse, or in ensuring successful outcomes. The result is that the current Government have a big job of work before them. I give the hon. Gentleman the same assurance as I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins): the current Government will get it right and we are on course to do so. In the next few months, to spring of next year, we shall review both current and previous projects to learn from mistakes made by the public and private sectors and to ensure that they are not made again.

Anti-drugs Strategy

2. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the anti–drugs strategy at local level. [101543]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): There is clear evidence that drug action teams—DATs—in some areas are producing good results. In other areas there are more difficulties. We have many good examples of DATs working successfully with more than 300 voluntary organisations throughout the country on all aspects of Government policy, from rehabilitation centres to prevention work in schools. We need a fuller picture, so we have a comprehensive programme of research in place; by April, we will have a full regional breakdown of the statistics.

Mr. Blizzard: Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that it is difficult for a single drugs action co-ordinator to drive the fight against drugs throughout a large shire county? We in Suffolk have more localised drugs and alcohol forums, but they tend to consist of the usual busy people who receive little support in their locality. Will my right hon. Friend consider establishing more localised drugs action co-ordinators in the towns where the worst drugs problems are found, so that they can more effectively spearhead the fight against drugs and eradicate that menace from communities?

Marjorie Mowlam: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. In some rural areas, such as Suffolk, implementing his suggestions might help. Some areas have already established such a co-ordinator by using some of the money made available by central Government, and we are in the process of consulting DATs so that we can learn from the best practice

employed by those that have already done that. It is important both to share good practice and to build flexibility into the system, so that we do not dictate to big city areas, many of which already cope well on the drugs front. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall return in the new year with fresh proposals, if we believe that they will help.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): The Government have set ambitious targets for reducing drug abuse, especially among the young. Does the right hon. Lady agree that the most effective way to prevent young people from taking drugs is to stifle the supply entering the country and available on the streets? Although seizures have increased, availability has not declined—in fact, quite the opposite is true. Therefore, is she confident that, within the budgets available, sufficient resources are being devoted, through Customs and Excise and the police, to curtailing both supplies and the activities of dealers?

Marjorie Mowlam: The hon. Lady should remember the cuts that the Conservative Government made to Customs and Excise—*[Interruption.]* To answer her question, we have provided an extra £50 million to the Department of Health and £60 million for treatment. Those are only two examples of extra money being given, out of a total of £250 million across Departments.

Mrs. Winterton: What about supply?

Marjorie Mowlam: The issue of supply is crucial to solving the problem. The police and Customs and Excise are working hard and I commend the actions that are taking place. It is crucial that the work is done. The money that has come in from Customs and Excise will be recycled and used to fight the problem. That is extremely helpful.

In addition, we are addressing the question of how drugs come into the country and how to cut supply. That is crucial to making progress. Alongside that, we are trying to work at the underlying causes of drug addiction. We are working with the Prison Service so that when people leave prison they do not come out to nothing—they come out trained and have the chance of not reoffending. We are working with social services to ensure that when people come out of care the most vulnerable are not open to abuse.

We are dealing with the problem in many different areas. We hope that over 10 years, when we have the strategy set out—it is not a problem that can be solved overnight—we shall make the necessary progress.

Permanent Secretaries

3. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What plans she has to change the designation, role and employment conditions of permanent secretaries. [101544]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): I have no plans to do so but, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister explained in his answer to a parliamentary question today, the permanent secretary heads of Department are themselves driving forward a radical programme of civil service reform. That will involve them adopting a corporate leadership role and participating in a management board for the civil service under the chairmanship of Sir Richard Wilson. That represents a major programme of change that will affect staff at all levels, including permanent secretaries.

Mr. Prentice: I take it from my right hon. Friend's answer that Sir Humphrey Appleby is dead and buried. If we are to have a new breed of civil servants delivering on the targets on which new Labour places such great store, surely there must be absolute transparency. Those who criticise us for politicising the civil service should get short shrift because new Labour would never do that.

There have been suggestions that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, to keep a grip on Whitehall, wants to establish a Prime Minister's Department, perhaps allied with the Cabinet Office. Has my right hon. Friend any comments to make on that speculation?

Marjorie Mowlam: My hon. Friend referred to Sir Humphrey. I had my trouble when I started working with the civil service and I did not find it easy. However, over the years of working with members of it, I have come to respect the work that they do and the impartiality and propriety that they bring to the job. I am not sure that my hon. Friend's initial comments are in any way helpful or constructive.

We support my hon. Friend's point about transparency. When he has had the chance to read all of "Modernising government", which relates to the public service, he will recognise that transparency is a crucial part of it.

The answer to the last part of my hon. Friend's question is no.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Does the Minister recognise that there is a remarkable coincidence, because the report to which she has referred appears just two days before the end of the evidence-taking sessions of the Phillips inquiry into BSE? Sir Richard Wilson's report on behalf of the permanent secretaries is apparently suggesting an extension of performance-related pay. Will the right hon. Lady give an undertaking that if there is any repetition of the bungles that were obviously characteristic of the previous Government over BSE, there will be reductions in the pay of higher civil servants?

Marjorie Mowlam: I get the gist of the point that the hon. Gentleman is making but the nature of the report is for the civil service. It is implementing it and it is in consultation over it. I am sure that those responsible have heard the hon. Gentleman's point.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that as a result of today's report from the head of the home civil service to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the permanent secretaries of the future will have experience of front-line delivery of services, experience of operational management and experience outside Whitehall?

Marjorie Mowlam: Obviously, I cannot give such a guarantee, but I can say that the appointments will be open and transparent. One of the objects of the report is to encourage greater exchange between the public and private sectors, and between the voluntary sector and

both, so that best practice and good experience are shared. The process will be open and transparent. There will be some secondees—there are at present more than 100—from the private to the public sector. I hope, as does the head of the civil service, that that arrangement will continue. It is a two-way street, which can only promote the efficient use of taxpayers' money and more effective services.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Will the right hon. Lady confirm that Sir Richard Wilson's report includes among the core values of the civil service its political impartiality? Will she therefore give the House two assurances—first, that the performance measures for which permanent secretaries will be held responsible will be in relation to targets for which they are directly responsible as administrators, not targets derived from the policy decisions of Ministers, for which Ministers should be held accountable?

Secondly, given the undermining of political impartiality by political appointments such as the Prime Minister's chief press spokesman and the chief economic adviser to the Treasury, will the right hon. Lady guarantee that no further appointments in the senior civil service will be made on a political, rather than an independent, basis?

Marjorie Mowlam: To deal with the final point first, unfounded accusations are not helpful to either party in government. I could stand at the Dispatch Box and list appointments under the previous Government, such as that of the then Mr. Burns, but that would get us nowhere. We do not make political appointments to civil service posts. The political advisers are a valuable asset because they provide a political dimension alongside the civil service. Impartiality is crucial; it exists and will continue.

On performance targets, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman reads the report. They are Department-linked, and I believe that that will continue.

Information Technology

4. **Mr. Mark Todd** (South Derbyshire): What steps have been taken to improve the delivery of Government IT projects. [101545]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): A major review of the handling of Government IT projects is under way, to identify the pillars that support successful IT projects and make sure that those are put in place in the future. Early work shows that those factors include a full assessment of the risks involved in a project, and clear plans for managing them; strong contingency plans; keeping the scale of a project manageable; making sure that both the supplier and the purchaser clearly understand the aims of the project, and their respective responsibilities; and building capacity for learning lessons from previous projects, both good and bad.

The review will ensure that we learn lessons from past projects, so that future systems run effectively and deliver value for money.

Mr. Todd: I thank my right hon. Friend for that full answer. He has taken out of my mouth many of the phrases connected with successful IT management. May I commend to him the remarks of the chief executive of the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency, who also highlighted the lack of leadership skills in this area and the need to supplement IT skills in key Departments? That adds to my central point, which is that any project requires clear and accountable leadership. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend is right. The points that I listed were not mere words. They describe a process that will dramatically improve the way in which the public sector, and central Government in particular, will produce IT projects in the future. One of the key areas is the skills and knowledge necessary to devise a project, to ensure that it is manageable, and to negotiate with those who will supply the project. My hon. Friend's remarks are well targeted. I give him an assurance that when the Government produce their IT projects strategy in March, what he said will be included in that strategy.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Has the Minister had a chance to look into what happened in the Home Office in relation to the IT project for passports? He will know that that was specified and ordered under the present Government, and that rather than the organisation becoming more efficient, we are told that people will have to pay 30 per cent. extra for their passports to pay for the mess that the Government created. That must surely be investigated by the Cabinet Office and the lessons learned for other projects.

Mr. McCartney: We are prepared not only to learn lessons from what happened in the Passport Agency; part of my work is dealing with the previous Government's projects in 1995, 1996 and 1997, all of which I have to review. In fact, we have to go back as far as 1990 to resolve the problems left by the previous Government. I shall take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman about botched IT projects.

Regulatory Impact Unit

5. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): If she will make a statement on the work of the regulatory impact unit. [101546]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): My right hon. Friend recently set out a whole new approach to cutting Government red tape. The unit has an important role in making sure that new regulations are really necessary, do not overlap and are as comprehensible as possible.

The unit also looks at existing regulations and asks the basic question, "Is there an alternative to regulation?"

Mr. Chapman: Given the police's views, reported earlier this week, that their administrative burden was so great that it hampered them in their duties, and, in particular, hindered them from doing front-line work, what plans have the Government to reduce the burden of red tape, especially in the public sector, so that people can spend more time doing their jobs and less time on administration?

Mr. Stringer: My hon. Friend is right; the police spend up to six hours completing initial paperwork for a simple

arrest. We are worried about that, and, consequently, one of my first tasks in the new year will be to visit a police station—voluntarily—to examine the paperwork involved. We are committed to ensuring that the public sector—schools, hospitals and the police—is not overburdened with red tape. We will try to find ways in which our teachers can spend more time in the classroom, our police can spend more time dealing with crime and our health workers can spend more time improving people's health.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the unit have any responsibility for regulating the speed with which Cabinet Ministers write their memoirs after leaving office? The going rate is £350,000.

Mr. Stringer: Cabinet Ministers' memoirs are already covered by rules, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend believe that the work of the unit, which is operating under yet another new name, will mean that, next year, new measures will come before the Select Committee on Deregulation?

Mr. Stringer: As my hon. Friend knows, next year we shall introduce a regulatory reform Bill, which will ensure that his Committee has plenty of work.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The Minister refers to the announcement on 15 November as "a whole new approach". Why, only three days later, did the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), sign an inadequate regulatory impact assessment of the Representation of the People Bill? What will the regulatory impact unit do about such an assessment, which appears to ignore the credit industry's view that clause 9 of that Bill would cost industry £800 million in the first year and £600 million thereafter. Marie Curie Cancer Care told me that clause 9 would cost it between £100,000 and £150,000 a year. The regulatory impact assessment does not reflect that.

Mr. Stringer: The matter is under review and a full regulatory impact assessment will be finalised.

Anti-drugs Strategy

6. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands): What progress is being made in implementing the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [101548]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): The Government are making good progress towards the tough targets set out in their strategy document, "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain". In June 1999, the national treatment outcome research study found that, two years after treatment, former users' drug use and related offending is significantly reduced. The study supports the strategy's aim of getting offenders into treatment. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced details of how £20 million has been set aside for the expansion of arrest referral schemes, which are designed to get drug misusers into treatment. That is in addition to the extra £217 million allocated to anti-drugs work as part of the previous spending review.

Charlotte Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. What efforts are being made—particularly through the school system, in both urban and rural areas—to prevent young people from getting into drugs? I believe that it would be complacent to suggest that there is no drugs problem in rural areas.

Mr. McCartney: The Government are deeply committed to dealing with what is, in effect, a war that is killing our young people. One 12-year-old in 12, one in three 14-year-olds and nearly half all 16-year-olds have tried drugs at least once. More than half of young homeless people use drugs regularly and one in 10 has tested positive for crack after committing an offence. The Government have set out basic targets to assess young people to prevent them from getting involved in drugs and to assist those who have become involved—both with their life style and in treatment programmes—to stop them using drugs, to sustain their education and employment and to give them and their families the space and opportunity to achieve a better, healthier life style.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Although I welcome the successes that the Government have been achieving, how successful have they been in sequestrating funds from known drug runners and dealers? Has further thought been given to marshalling world financial centres to do away with known drugs-funded bank accounts?

Mr. McCartney: We are working internationally to prevent drugs from coming into this country and co-operating across international boundaries on security and intelligence issues. We are also working with developing countries to promote alternatives to growing the poppy in the killing fields. It must be made clear that the 10-year programme introduced by the Government—*[Interruption.]* I hope that hon. Members are listening because we are talking about the youth of this country: 3,000 have died in the past year alone and that could touch any one of us, so please listen. We must make it clear in the 10-year plan that no drug baron, no drug cartel and no drug dealer can feel safe in carrying on his evil activity in this country. That requires the assistance of everybody in the community working together: the people, local government, the health service, the police, Customs and Excise and, dare I say it, Members of the House.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does the Minister agree that some of the saddest and most intractable examples of people with drug problems are those rough sleepers who are addicted to alcohol and other drugs? Are not the policies of the homelessness Tsarina a great encouragement and should not the House congratulate her on those new, pragmatic, practical and courageous policies?

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be making further announcements about investing in the care and social needs of those who are on the street. That includes access not only to accommodation, but to health care, education and training and a range of other measures that will help to bring them back into a sustainable life style.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Given that about half of all drug treatment and testing orders are being breached and nearly a third have been revoked by the courts, what steps are the Government planning to take to make them more effective than they seem to be at present?

Mr. McCartney: Without that action there would be 100 per cent. failure: no young people would be diverted into treatment programmes; no young people would be diverted from drugs into education and training; and no young people would be directed from the street into protective environments. The programme has been successful and because of it children who would have died in the next few years will live. That should be commended by all Members of the House.

Modernisation

7. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What impact proposals for Government modernisation will have on the Government's equality programme. [101549]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): Our commitment to modernising the civil service includes our targets to double the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the senior civil service within the next five years. Having more women and ethnic minorities in the civil service will improve our equality programme and how we deliver it for everyone, particularly through the duty on all public authorities to promote equality of opportunity.

Fiona Mactaggart: Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the fact that there are no less than three Departments with lead responsibility for equality and tackling discrimination—the women's unit in the Cabinet Office, the race relations unit in the Home Office and the sex and race equality division in the Department for Education and Employment? Does she have any plans to join up the work of those Departments to make our attempts to tackle inequality and discrimination more efficient and effective?

Marjorie Mowlam: In the Cabinet Office, we are looking into how we can prioritise the mainstreaming of the equality issue. We do that by working across Departments. My hon. Friend asked whether it is better to bring those units together. Our present view is that it is not, because if equality is central to every policy, it is better that the units are in the Departments to ensure that that policy is implemented. However, I hear what she says. We have discussed this matter, and as a result of her question we shall certainly think about it again.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [101572] **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 December.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Heath: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer, and welcome him to the last Prime Minister's questions of the millennium.

Why will a school in London that he knows well get from the Government next year £4,446 per pupil—and it says that it is not enough—whereas the school that my children attend in Somerset is allocated by that same Government just £2,984 per pupil? That is more than £1,400 less for each and every child in the school. His Ministers admit that that inequality is wrong, but they talk about stability for three years—I call it prolonging unfairness. When will our children get a fair deal from the Government?

The Prime Minister: I shall not go into the individual allocations for each school. I shall merely point out that, under the Government, education spending is rising substantially. It will increase by about 17 per cent. in real terms. After what I accept were two difficult years, we are providing for the next three years the largest increase in education spending that this country has seen. That will help children in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as well as children in constituencies around the country. Class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds are falling and thousands of schools are getting the help that they need, as a consequence of which exam results are improving. As a result of the Government's education policies, we are once again increasing the proportion of national income that we spend on education. That stands in stark contrast with the record of the Tories.

Q2. [101573] **Mr. Hilton Dawson** (Lancaster and Wyre): While deservedly enjoying the forthcoming celebrations, will my right hon. Friend reflect that it would be right and proper—[HON. MEMBERS: "Reading."] Indeed, I can read—to mark the contribution of older people and pensioners to this century by eliminating pensioner poverty in the next?

The Prime Minister: We are doing a lot to reduce pensioner poverty. Millions of pensioner households receive the £100 winter fuel payment. From autumn 2000, more than 3 million pensioner households will benefit from free television licences for pensioners aged 75 or over. The minimum income guarantee will help many of the poorest pensioners. It is this Government who have cut the VAT on fuel that was imposed by the previous Government, and have restored free eye tests for pensioners, which were taken away by the previous Government. As we now know from the speech made recently by the shadow Social

Security Secretary, the £100 and all the other things we have done for pensioners would be taken away by a future Conservative Government.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Since 1999 was meant to be the year of delivery, will the Prime Minister tell us the latest figure for the fall in the number of police since the last election?

The Prime Minister: I have accepted that the number of police has fallen since the last election—as, indeed, it was falling for the two and three years before the election. However, as a result of what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has now announced, the number of recruits will rise again, and police numbers will rise again. They fell in the first two years because we implemented, as we said we would, the published plans of the Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member.

Mr. Hague: The number rose by 16,000 under the last Government. Why does the Prime Minister not read out the number? It must be there, in his folder. It is in the Home Office annual police statistics. The number of police has fallen by 1,062 since the last election, and this was meant to be the year of delivery. So much for delivering on the Prime Minister's promise to be tough on crime.

If the Prime Minister does not want to give that number, will he now tell us how many more people are waiting to see hospital consultants than at the time of the last election?

The Prime Minister: Actually, the waiting list figures have fallen. It is true that the out-patient figures have risen, as they have been rising for 10 years. The in-patient waiting lists, however, are coming down, as a result of the additional money that we have put in.

If I may return to police numbers for a moment—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman asked. He said that the last Government had increased the number of police. That is correct if we take the entire period between 1979 and 1997, but, during the years when the right hon. Gentleman was a Cabinet member of the last Government, police numbers actually fell. As I have said, as a result of the additional money that the Home Secretary has allocated, those numbers will now rise.

I can give the right hon. Gentleman the figures for the Metropolitan police. Yes, numbers fell in the first two years, but there are now over 500 more officers appointed on probation who can then take their place in the Metropolitan police, and numbers will start to rise again. I accept that during the first two years it was difficult, because we had to clear the public financial deficit and sort out the situation that we had inherited; but more investment is now going into schools, hospitals and dealing with crime. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that that is the extra spending that he described as reckless and irresponsible.

Mr. Hague: What all that waffle means is that the number of police has fallen in the year of delivery, and the plain fact that the Prime Minister does not want to read out what is in his folder. It is all there: according to the Department of Health's statistical bulletin, the number of people waiting to see hospital consultants has risen from 248,000 to 512,000. That is the fact—actually.

Those are people who, because of the Prime Minister, are being made to wait to be on a waiting list. The number of people waiting for two and a half years to hear him tell the truth about this has risen to 55 million. So much for delivering on waiting lists.

If the Prime Minister does not want to give the facts about that, however, will he tell us the truth about this? Will he tell us by how much the tax burden has risen since the last election?

The Prime Minister: Let me first deal with what the right hon. Gentleman said about health. He is wrong. We have actually treated an extra 175,000 out-patients this year, and we shall treat an extra 300,000 next year. It is true that waiting lists were rising for years before we came to office, but we have reduced in-patient waiting lists by more than 70,000 from the level that we inherited. As for tax, as I told the right hon. Gentleman a couple of weeks ago, in the first two years we cleared the financial deficit, but next year—or, rather, in the current financial year—the tax burden is falling, not rising.

Actually—*[Laughter.]* This is important. I now have the figures for the Conservative plans published just before the last election by the Cabinet of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member. They show that the tax burden this year and next year will be lower than under the plans that he endorsed before the election.

Mr. Hague: We are asking the Prime Minister about his year of delivery, which he announced 1999 was going to be. It is no good saying that our figures are wrong, because they are the Government's figures. I have quoted the Home Office annual police statistics and figures from the Department of Health statistical bulletin. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the tax burden in this country has grown from 35.6 per cent. to 37.7 per cent. of gross domestic product since he came to office, yet he said that there would be no tax increases. So that people know where their increased taxes are going, will he confirm that the cost of Government administration has risen by £1,100 million since the election—enough to pay for thousands of police and tens of thousands of hospital operations?

The Prime Minister: I do not confirm that. On tax, the same figures that the right hon. Gentleman quoted show that this year the tax burden is falling. This year, which I said was the year of delivery, the tax burden is falling, in-patient waiting lists are falling, class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds are falling and unemployment is falling. That is precisely what we said we would do.

As for the number of police, I have accepted that for the first two years we adhered to the plans that we inherited when we came into office, but now, thanks to the extra 5,000 recruits, those numbers will rise. Those are the facts about how we are delivering for people in this country. The right hon. Gentleman cannot actually dispute any one of them.

Mr. Hague: The figures that I have given on the vastly increased spending on Government administration come from the Treasury's public expenditure statistical analysis.

Actually, that is where they come from. What is the point of spending an extra £1 billion on bureaucrats and advisers when the Prime Minister is not prepared to read out the facts that they put in front of him? The only way to get the truth about this Government from a Prime Minister is to ask the Prime Minister of France. *[Interruption.]* It is true.

Is it not true that one of the Prime Minister's aides said to the *Independent on Sunday*:

"Did we say 1999 was the year of delivery? It was always going to be next year when things really started to happen."?

The figures show that his year of delivery has been a year of fewer police, longer waiting lists, higher taxes and more bureaucracy. Should not his new year's resolution be to keep the promises that he has been breaking over the past year?

The Prime Minister: If I could go back through the issues, on health, the in-patient waiting lists were actually rising for years and years. They have now started to fall and are nearly 80,000 below the level that we inherited. That is the fact. Class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds are 300,000 below what we inherited. Crime is below the level that we inherited. I have already made the position on police officers clear. The tax burden is falling this year. If we are going to debate the respective positions of the two parties, it is worth saying— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House must come to order on both sides.

The Prime Minister: We accepted that we were going to have two difficult years. [HON. MEMBERS: "The microphones are off!"] That is probably because the people operating them thought that the Conservatives had stopped listening, so there was no point in turning them on any more.

When we came to office we had a £28 billion borrowing requirement and the national debt had doubled. As a result of the measures that we have taken, unemployment is falling, we have 700,000 extra jobs and we have got through a downturn without a recession for the first time in decades. Since someone is holding up our pledge card, let me go through it. We promised that we would keep inflation and interest rates under control—a promise kept. We promised that we would cut youth unemployment—a promise kept. We promised that in-patient hospital waiting lists would fall—they are falling. We promised that we would ensure that class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds would fall—they have fallen.

If we adopted the right hon. Gentleman's position of opposing all the spending increases that we have proposed, where would hospital waiting lists and class sizes be then? The right hon. Gentleman also opposed the new deal that has reduced unemployment. In the end, the right hon. Gentleman can use whatever lines he likes. Yes, we had two difficult years, but we are delivering for the people of this country and their choice is between higher employment and stability under this Government or spending cuts and boom and bust under a Government led by the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that one of the Government's greatest success stories has been the year-on-year improvement in primary school performance? Will he join me in congratulating teachers throughout the United Kingdom on delivering yet another improvement in the key stage 2 results published last week? However, will he accept that there are still problems in the presentation of the league tables in that schools representing the poorest communities can never get to the top of the tables as currently constituted? Will he assure the House that the Government will modernise the system of league tables and recognise the value added by primary schools to their pupils' performance?

The Prime Minister: We are always looking at ways to improve the information provided by the league tables. We must take account of the fact that social factors will play some part. I have two points to make. First, as a result of the measures that we have taken for primary schools there has been an astonishing increase in literacy and numeracy. Those proposals were opposed by the Conservative party. Secondly, on secondary schools, the new specialist and beacon schools are already showing a big lift in GCSE results. That is good news for the future and it shows the difference between the two main political parties.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Leaving to one side—the House will be relieved to know—the year of delivery, will the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the House join me in acknowledging that, in terms of human progress and despite the terrible ravages of war along the way, it has been an unbelievable century of delivery in terms of prosperity, education, health, communications and so on? *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives seem to have difficulty with that notion. I do not know why, as they helped to contribute to it.

Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that all that welcome progress has been purchased with one terrible toll, which is the effect on our planet's natural environment? Will he rethink his recent changes in Government policy on road building and concreting over substantial swathes of the green belt in southern England for house-building programmes? That can hardly be the right way to begin a commitment to the environment in the next century.

The Prime Minister: The amount of greenbelt land is increasing, not diminishing. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has increased the amount that must be built on brownfield sites to a 60 per cent. target from the 40 per cent. target of the Conservatives. Therefore, those criticisms are not justified. On road maintenance, many of the things such as bypasses that have been announced by the Deputy Prime Minister are important for communities. On the environment as a whole, thanks to the Deputy Prime Minister, we have delivered through the Kyoto summit probably the biggest and best step forward in environmental standards that the world has seen for a long time.

Mr. Kennedy: Let us move the focus away from the Deputy Prime Minister and back to the Prime Minister. During his time in office the Prime Minister has not devoted exclusively a single speech to the environment. When the Prime Minister sets that mood music from the

top, he can hardly be surprised that his Government are not behaving in an environmentally sustainable way. Why, for example, has he not honoured his pledge before the last election that he would publish a green book to accompany the Budget? Should he not take the opportunity of the new year to redouble his efforts on these issues to make sure that in the next century we begin to contribute to undoing the environmental damage of the last century?

The Prime Minister: The criticism on environmental matters is unfair. As a result of the Kyoto summit, countries undertook an obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and this country will hit our targets. We have a set of proposals that will enable us easily to meet the Kyoto targets, and that was the biggest step forward. We also led the way at G8. It is not true to say that I have not spoken about the environment; I have spoken about it. I mentioned the Deputy Prime Minister because the Kyoto summit would have failed without him. It is a tribute to him that it succeeded.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I was delighted to be able to welcome my right hon. Friend to Salford last week, when he opened an extension to our wonderful metrolink system—which has now carried 1 million people in the conurbation. May we have his support for the massive extension of the metrolink system across the conurbation—which would help to keep our city moving and improve our environment?

The Prime Minister: The metrolink is a great example of an integrated transport system, and its establishment has—voluntarily—reduced the number of car journeys by 2.5 million in the area. It is a great tribute to a modern transport strategy. Now, we have to ensure that we deliver that type of programme in different parts of the country.

Q3. [101574] **Sir Archie Hamilton** (Epsom and Ewell): Does the Prime Minister think that it is right that a member of his Cabinet should sell her memoirs—for untold sums, and a reported advance of £350,000—when she is still a member of the Government?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has acted entirely in accordance with the rules.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): Since this is the season of good will towards all, will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the Leader of the Opposition on his year of delivery? In particular, does my right hon. Friend agree that an astonishing achievement of the Leader of the Opposition has been to deliver a Conservative party that, today—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. I must remind him that the Prime Minister is responsible only for Government policies, not for the Leader of the Opposition's achievements.

Q4. [101575] **Mr. Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton):Does the Prime Minister share my concern that—despite recent improvements, thanks to the fabulous efforts of staff—patients waiting at Kingston hospital's accident and emergency unit still face painful waiting times in an out-of-date building? Will the Prime Minister, therefore, personally intervene to ask the London region's NHS executive to confirm urgently that the new investment needed to modernise Kingston hospital's accident and emergency department will be announced? Will he give me and my constituents the assurance that the long delays in pushing ahead with the new investment will end, so that people suffering those long delays at Kingston's A and E department may, at long last, expect such waits to end?

The Prime Minister: The regional office of the NHS Executive will be receiving the capital allocations in the first week of January, and it will be able to inform Kingston hospital of the outcome in the following week. If approved, work will start as soon as possible. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentleman some solace that there is news on the way quickly. I assure him that the executive understands why the project is regarded as a very high priority. I should also point out that—as he will know—Kingston hospital has already received £2 million from the accident and emergency modernisation fund, and that, this year, the health authority has received an extra £11 million funding.

I agree, however, that there is still an awful lot more to do in accident and emergency departments right across the country. That is why, by the end of next year, every accident and emergency department that needs it will have been refurbished—which is one step on the way to improving the national health service. Although Liberal Democrat Members support those changes, those capital allocations and that expenditure was opposed by Conservative Members.

Q5. [101576] **Mr. Geraint Davies** (Croydon, Central): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the educational success of Wolsey school in Croydon in the New Addington education action zone, which became one of the top 30 improving schools in Britain through a combination of information technology, adding value to numeracy and literacy, providing breakfast clubs and fresh fruit at tuck shops—to add to nutrition and aid concentration—and using counselling techniques to improve the self-esteem and expectations of children, combined with business mentoring? Does he agree that the hope and opportunity provided by the school spreads a message throughout the land that we can provide pathways out of poverty through educational success in education action zones?

The Prime Minister I understand that the percentage of year 6 pupils reaching the required standard or better at Wolsey junior school has improved by 8 per cent., taking it to 84 per cent., which is a fantastic achievement for the school. Indeed, the schools in that education action zone have raised their performance by about 8 per cent. in English and an amazing 22 per cent. in maths. For all the education action zones, the average performance in maths improved by 14 per cent. Since as my hon. Friend spoke Conservative Members were shouting derogatory remarks about how Conservative support would grow in my hon. Friend's constituency—

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Tory gain.

The Prime Minister: I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman should be so arrogant as to think that. One reason why there will not be a Tory gain is that under this

Government the results have improved by 14 per cent., but the Conservative party is opposed to the very changes that made that happen. When my hon. Friend's constituents realise that the Conservatives are also opposed to the minimum wage, the working families tax credit, the new deal and sound economics, there will be even more Labour voters in that Croydon constituency.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Can the Prime Minister explain why, under the Freedom of Information Bill, information on ministerial offices, staffing levels and staffing costs should not be made available for public scrutiny?

The Prime Minister: The provisions of the Freedom of Information Bill will allow more information to be disclosed than the code of practice under the previous Government. What is more, for the first time, there will be an independent commissioner who can require disclosure. I do not think that we should take lessons in freedom of information from a Conservative Government who opposed such a Bill at the last election and had 18 years in which they could have introduced one but refused to do so.

Q6. [101577] **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): Does the Prime Minister agree that, on the eve of the 21st century, it shames this country to have so many people sleeping on the streets? Will he ensure that the Government not only provide accommodation but tackle the host of other problems to which many people who sleep rough are subject, such as alcohol dependency and mental health problems, so that some of our more unfortunate citizens can be given a real chance of a better life?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the measures that have already been taken on rough sleepers, the numbers have fallen in the past six or nine months from 2,500 to 1,600, but our desire now is to ensure that we can tackle the rest of the problem. The £200 million that has been allocated from within the existing comprehensive spending review settlement will be invested in a variety of measures: new hostel beds, new housing association homes in London and a better approach to co-ordinating measures to deal with the different problems that homeless people face. It is a scandal that so many homeless people are still on our streets. This Government at least are committed to tackling that scandal and to ending it.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Does the Prime Minister accept that his earlier answers to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition will lead many people to conclude that the year of delivery that the right hon. Gentleman has promised has ended as a year of deceit? Will he at least come clean on the tax burden and admit that, whether or not he hopes that it will fall in the next three years, in the current year it is higher than the one that he inherited?

The Prime Minister: The tax burden this year is falling, not rising. I said that in the first two years of this Government we had to take some difficult decisions to clear the financial deficit. I also pointed out that our tax burden is less than that planned for by the previous Conservative Government. However, there are only two choices. Either we ensure that we get rid of the financial deficit and put the economy in the shape in which it is today—where we are delivering jobs, stability, low inflation and low interest rates—or we go back to the days of the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported and of whom he was a Minister, who saw 1 million manufacturing jobs go, had interest rates at 10 per cent. for four years or more and who wrecked this country through two big recessions and had record repossessions. Everyone remembers the days of boom and bust under the Tories. Under this Government, for the first time in years, people realise that new Labour is the party of economic competence today.

Q7. [101578] **Mr. Paul Marsden** (Shrewsbury and Atcham): Is my right hon. Friend aware that 100 years ago, in 1899, the House of Commons was prorogued for Christmas on 27 October? *[Interruption.]* And people complain about the length of our recesses! Is he also aware that in that year, the key concerns of hon. Members included the situation in Ireland? Is it not the case that further important developments this week in the peace process have meant that we have more grounds for optimism for a peaceful and prosperous new year in Northern Ireland than we have had for many generations?

The Prime Minister: In respect of the recess, I hear what my hon. Friend says, as we all do, but I do not suppose that we should refer that point to the Modernisation Committee.

There could be no better present for the new millennium than a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. We have come a very long way—things are happening today in Northern Ireland that people would simply not have believed possible before. The most heartening aspect is the sense, right across the communities in Northern Ireland, that there is for the first time some confidence and hope about the future. There are many difficulties along the way, but if a new millennium and a new start mean anything—and anything that we can look forward to—it will be a lasting future and peace for the children of Northern Ireland, who deserve a future better than the past that they have had.

Millennium Compliance

3.32 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I am pleased to update hon. Members with the results of the final monthly review of progress in tackling the millennium bug across government. The completed questionnaires, on which the review is based, will be placed in the Libraries of the House and published on the internet as usual.

The report follows my written statement to the House on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 183-85W. In addition to a report on central Government, I am also reporting on preparedness across the national infrastructure, including key services delivered by the wider public sector.

I am pleased to report that work on business critical systems is now complete in all Departments and agencies. That means that systems have been fixed, tested and successfully put back into operation. Business continuity plans and millennium operating regimes—BCPs and MORs—are essential safeguards against the impact of unforeseen bug failures and the other particular pressures of the millennium holiday period. All Departments and agencies also have robust and tested BCPs and MORs in place, and are keeping those arrangements under review so that they can continue to deliver essential services. An immense quantity of work has been undertaken across government to ensure completion of work on business critical systems, BCPs and MORs. I congratulate Departments and agencies on their continuing efforts.

For the central Government millennium operating regime, the Government will be operating a millennium centre from 31 December to 7 January. Staff in the centre will be drawn from the Cabinet Office Year 2000 team and Cabinet Office secretariats, supplemented by staff from Action 2000 and volunteers from other Departments; from the Y2K media co-ordination unit, supported by Departmental press officers; and from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport millennium unit.

The centre will collate information from Departments about any significant millennium problems in the sectors for which they have policy responsibility. There will also be links with similar centres in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and with the Government offices for the regions. More than 200 people in all will be involved and the team in the centre will provide up-to-the minute briefing to Ministers and the media on the emerging picture. On 26 October, Exercise Herald tested the arrangements and demonstrated that they were sound, and further improvements have been made in the light of that work.

The Government millennium centre will post all press releases and statements during the millennium period to a special website, which will also act as a signpost to other sites of interest. The website will give the public and the media easy access to information about the situation in the UK as it enters the new millennium. All this information can be found over the millennium period at www.millennium-centre.gov.uk.

Independent assessments of the readiness of the national infrastructure with respect to Y2K compliance and business continuity planning have been undertaken as part of the national infrastructure assessment project run by Action 2000. Organisations within the programme were also required to have robust millennium operating regimes in place in order to achieve the top blue rating.

The process of independent assessment of the state of preparations for the date change of the UK's national infrastructure has given us one of the most—if not the most—comprehensive and objective pictures of national readiness for the date change in the world.

In my last statement to the House, I confirmed that all areas of the national infrastructure were rated as 100 per cent. blue. This means that independent assessors have not identified any risk of material disruption as a result of their full assessment, and that the public can expect a normal service. These sectors included utilities such as electricity and water, as well as police, fire, telecommunications and health care. I am pleased to report that all sectors remain 100 per cent. blue and that they will keep their state of readiness under constant review between now and the end of the year.

While there can be no absolute guarantees, the overall aim set out by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—to ensure no material disruption to the essential public services of the UK as a result of the millennium bug—should now be achieved. The Government and those who provide services across the national infrastructure have invested a monumental effort to meet that objective. We have less information about other countries, so we cannot be confident that there will not be problems elsewhere, but we have taken action to assess and minimise the impact of those problems on the United Kingdom.

Of course, no matter how much testing has been done, the possibility of some failures still remains, although if these occur, they are likely to be localised and short term. That is why we place so much emphasis on the need for robust and tested business continuity plans to be put in place, so that essential services can continue to be delivered.

Any disruptions that may occur over the date change could be related to bad weather or the length and scale of this year's celebrations, as much as to the millennium bug. The Government have, therefore, widened their preparations to deal with all aspects of the millennium. Even at this late stage, and with so much work completed, we cannot afford to be complacent. We need to ensure that the necessary monitoring work continues through the final weeks.

The Government will continue to lead by example and to be open and transparent about our work. I will make a further statement to the House, probably in January, on the impact of the date change on central Government and the national infrastructure.

As we approach the final days of the millennium, I pay tribute to the vast number of people in the UK across the public and private sectors who have worked tirelessly, and whose effort is almost without equal internationally, to meet the goal that we set of ensuring no material disruption in our country as a result of the millennium bug.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I apologise to you and the House, Madam Speaker, for my somewhat uncharacteristically quiet voice. I seem to have contracted a virus resulting in some form of bug.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): Did you catch it from John Redwood?

Mrs. Browning: Most certainly not.

I am grateful to the Leader of the House for making the papers available to me at half-past two this afternoon. I join her in paying tribute to those who have worked across the country in an operation that has gone on now for a long time. I have studied the detailed papers that the right hon. Lady deposits in the Library from time to time, and it is clear from reading them that a lot of work has been done in both the private and public sectors, although I did detect a slight hint of "www.not.me.guv" in the right hon. Lady's voice, in case something goes wrong. We all welcome the fact that at this date, which is so close to the end of the year, she has been able to give us such a reassuring statement.

The right hon. Lady stated that all systems have been completed. Will she confirm that that includes the testing of contingency plans? She will recall that, during her previous statement to the House on this subject, I asked about one or two individual contingency plans that still had to be tested—especially those for the Ministry of Defence. The official papers show that the MOD was not due to complete testing until December. It would be reassuring if she could confirm those points.

The right hon. Lady mentioned that lessons had been learned after Exercise Herald on 26 October. She announced the use of a website to be used by the Government millennium centre to deal with any problems. Which member of the Cabinet will have responsibility for the centre over the new year? Will it be the right hon. Lady or, perhaps, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam)? In the event of major problems, will there be a ministerial presence at the Cabinet Office centre?

Since the right hon. Lady made her previous statement, Northern Ireland has taken responsibility for its own preparations in this matter. Will she confirm that there has been a smooth transition from Whitehall to Belfast? Some late contingency plans in Northern Ireland were outstanding, such as the plan for the payment of teachers' salaries? Have those plans been sorted out?

A recurring theme in the deposited papers is that of remuneration packages in the public sector. Will the right hon. Lady confirm that all such packages have been agreed for those who will be working over the new year bank holiday to deal with any potential problems that might arise? Several of those plans were outstanding. It is important that lack of preparation should not impede the presence of key staff on the night, and afterwards, if there are problems—especially in the public sector.

I thank the right hon. Lady for her courtesy, and that of her officials, in briefing me extensively a little while ago, so that the Opposition were aware of some of the detailed background planning that has gone into the preparations.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, especially for her final remarks. I accept her thanks, especially for my staff and for the Government advisers who took part in that briefing. I am glad that she found it helpful. I am happy to record that for her to have gone through that heap of material in the Library was probably above and beyond the call of duty. I am grateful to her for confirming that it shows the position clearly.

The hon. Lady asked me about the testing of contingency plans at the MOD. I confirm that that work has been completed. She asked about responsibility for the millennium centre. In general, I am primarily responsible for the centre. There will be ministerial presences in the Cabinet Office during the period. The work will be shared among different Ministers; all Departments will have someone on standby and several Ministers will be available to the centre.

The hon. Lady asked me to confirm that work in Northern Ireland had been completed. I can confirm that. We experienced no problems during the handover and the transition. I am not aware that there are any outstanding problems on remuneration, although she will be aware that that matter has been settled in the individual organisations.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Is my right hon. Friend aware that earlier in the week, when I asked the vice-chancellor of a university with strong science departments what was his greatest concern about the millennium, he replied, "It's not physics or chemistry; it's the possibility of burglary and vandalism". Given that the police—like the rest of us—have families with whom they may want to spend the millennium, what can be done to monitor obviously vulnerable situations?

May I be allowed a second question? Earlier in the year, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary rightly said that he paid much regard to his talks with the Russians about the Soviet Arctic fleet. Now that relations with the Russians have unfortunately cooled, have those talks continued?

Mrs. Beckett: I hope, to some degree, to reassure my hon. Friend on his important point about the need for public services, such as the police, to continue to work over the millennium period. He is right to say that the police, like the rest of us, wish to spend time with their families. Although I am pleased to be able to pay tribute to the work of the police as a public service, my hon. Friend may not be aware that, despite that wish, all police leave in all parts of the country has been cancelled. The same applies to other emergency services, such as the fire service. The House will wish to place on record the debt of gratitude that we owe to such public servants at all times, but particularly for the commendable spirit that they have shown in these preparations.

On the Arctic fleet, I can tell my hon. Friend that, whatever the developments in general relations with Russia, there has continued to be an exchange of information, advice and co-operation. Those exchanges have taken place not only with ourselves, but with our allies. I am not aware of the specific circumstances of the Arctic fleet, but I will inquire into that. However, as I know that other work and the exchange of information has continued, I see no reason to doubt that it has continued in that case.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I join the Leader of the House and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) in congratulating the United Kingdom's information technology industry, in both the public and the private sectors, on the way that it has faced this technical challenge. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I also express my appreciation to the right hon. Lady for the responsible and sober way in

[Mr. Richard Allan]

which she has reported to the House on these matters. That has contrasted well with the scaremongering and the attempts to make political capital that took place in the early days about what is essentially a technical challenge.

Will the report that the Leader of the House will present in January cover some of the wider issues about costs in the public sector, and will it deal with the contractual issues for Government bodies that deal with annual rather than rolling budgets?

At a domestic level, I invite the right hon. Lady to congratulate the staff of Parliament who have worked very hard to get our systems in place. I know that she has been able to write to all Members to tell them that our systems will be up and running across the millennium period. Although our constituents would probably place access to on-line *Hansard* slightly lower down their list of priorities than access to electricity and gas, that small example of how to approach the problem reflects very well on the staff of the House.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I shall certainly convey his thanks to all the staff who worked with me on preparing this statement. I know that his comments will be much appreciated.

I shall obviously consider the issues that we want to cover in the report back to the House. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that all the indications about costs suggest that they are remaining stable at about £430 million for central Government. It is harder to assess more widely than that. Figures of £1 billion and £3 billion have been suggested, and the wider costs will no doubt be of that order of magnitude. The hon. Gentleman will probably know that the costs to central Government are about a 16 per cent. increase on what was anticipated in 1997, but the figure has stayed roughly stable for quite some time.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important and interesting point about contractual issues. It will be interesting to see how they develop. One of the helpful features of the work that has been done is that it has encouraged an exchange of information rather than a contested relationship between bodies that have mutual inter-dependency. That has seen us very well in the run-up to the date change, and I hope that that attitude and experience will continue.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Can we have an assurance that the nuclear industry—both the nuclear power generation sector and the reprocessing sector—has been required to undertake to the Government that it is fully millennium compliant? Can we also be told whether Foreign Office officials have been monitoring the level of compliance by the nuclear industry in other parts of the world?

Mrs. Beckett: In addition to the assurances that it might have been required to give the Government, the nuclear industry in this country has been required to give assurances to the independent nuclear installations inspectorate, which has monitored the detail of its work and its continuity plans, such as they may be, its operating regimes and so on. All that has been independently assessed and cleared by inspectorate staff.

My hon. Friend asked about the monitoring of nuclear industries overseas. Part of the Foreign Office's work has been to provide as much information as it can, in the widest possible context—not just in the context of the nuclear industry—about the position throughout the world. Again, international enforcement agencies have been monitoring the position. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), there has been much international exchanging of information, advice and support in that sector. Obviously, that gives us some of the reassurance that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) seeks.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): What additional remuneration will people who are working directly for Departments get—as opposed to the additional remuneration that other people in the public sector, such as nurses and doctors, will get?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman that because there is no overall fixed regime. It has been left to Departments to make the arrangements that they need and to come to agreements with staff. Obviously, in some Departments there is a normal expectation of continuity of service that will be needed over the millennium, so different arrangements have been made by different Departments.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): My hon. Friend will be aware that the UK's role has been commended as a model of good practice internationally. However, she will also be aware that the millennium bug can lead not just to failure, but to misunderstandings. In view of rising tensions in Grozny, in particular, and in other parts of the world, can she assure the House that allowances have been made for those misunderstandings to be taken into account by the Ministry of Defence, particularly with regard to nuclear warnings? Can she assure the House that, given that the millennium bug could affect us on a number of key dates throughout next year, she will continue to report to the House?

Mrs. Beckett: I will be happy to keep the House informed. Whether we will need to have the sort of regular reports that we have had during the latter part of this year remains to be seen, although my hon. Friend is right to say that there are other key dates, in particular, obviously, the end of February.

My hon. Friend asked about misunderstandings. He may know that, for example, the American Government and Russian Government have not only exchanged information and kept each other up to date, but are to exchange personnel, so a huge amount has been done internationally to try to ensure that difficulties do not arise unnecessarily.

My hon. Friend was good enough to refer to the UK being seen internationally as a model of good practice. The House may like to know that our original Action 2000 leaflet "Home Check" was reprinted in Canada and Jersey and by *Reader's Digest* in China and Australia. It has been distributed to all Shell staff world wide. The business packs are being used in the United States, France and Greece. The business and domestic packs are being used in Sweden, India and worldwide by Cable and Wireless.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I thank my right hon. Friend for the information and the

Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, for his work. However, we must not forget my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), who started the work two and a half years ago. It is commendable that we have done all this and I congratulate everyone.

I am slightly nervous that everything is web-centric. Will the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 carry information and hotline numbers during the period? Many people will not have access to computers at school because they will be shut down. What proposals do we have to stop merchant ships and aeroplanes that are not millennium compliant docking or landing?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend asks about information being available. Representatives of the news media will be in the Government's millennium centre. They will operate freely—they will not be under our control in any sense. They will be free to report the information that they are gathering. We anticipate that some of the television media, the Press Association, and other such people will be there. We also anticipate being able to make information available, if required, on Teletext, so that it is more readily available.

My hon. Friend asked about hotline numbers. We are encouraging people to gain information about local services, which are the ones that supply their home or place of business, by collecting local numbers. From this week, there are to be advertisements in 550 local newspapers, placed by and in conjunction with local service providers, to disseminate information widely among the general public.

My hon. Friend also asks specifically about ships and airlines. I understand that any ship that has not been able to provide assurances about millennium compliance will not be on the high seas, will certainly not be allowed into port and will probably not be released to leave port in the run-up to the date change rollover. No airline is currently expected to face problems over the United Kingdom. The only airline over which a query hangs, in that it has been unable to satisfy the authorities as to its millennium compliance, does not fly into or out of this country.

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): Given that the right hon. Lady has rightly and consistently warned the House that there are no guarantees that there will be no disruption in the first weeks and months of the new year, what is her personal advice to ordinary people, such as domestic householders, on the sensible precautions that they should have taken or should be in the process of taking?

Mrs. Beckett: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He has followed this issue since the beginning—indeed, his interest commenced far earlier than most others. His expertise is well known and I am grateful for the interest he has always shown. The only personal advice I would offer to people—indeed, the advice I intend to follow myself—is simply to make the sensible preparations that they would make for any Christmas and new year, with some slight additional recognition of the fact that they should expect more unexpected visitors who might eat and drink rather more heavily than usual.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): We welcome full compliance and acknowledge the substantial efforts, including the right hon. Lady's, made to achieve it. However, does she agree that a certain competitive tension between Departments and Government agencies to be the first to achieve the desired objective is a good thing? Consistent with that principle, will she say which Department or agency was the last to achieve full compliance and give the reason for its tardiness?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is right: there is something to be said for people learning from each other and sharing best practice. However, in response to his point about potential competition between Departments, I would point out that the key to what has been achieved throughout the public and private sectors is co-operation and exchange of information. He asks me to identify which was the last Department to complete its work and to give the reason why. I think that it was the Ministry of Defence, and the reason is simple: that Ministry has infinitely more systems than any other Department. Memory tells me that, of about 30,000 systems throughout government that needed to be assessed, the Ministry of Defence has about 10,000.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My right hon. Friend has been engaged in probably the largest contingency planning exercise in peacetime. It would be a great pity if all the data that have been collected were simply to be shoved aside after the key dates had been reached. Will she ensure that all Departments and Government agencies retain the data and make them available to all authorities involved in emergency planning, and to any expert groups that might be set up, with a view to extracting the best information for future planning purposes?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right: there has never been such an exhaustive reassessment and testing of diverse arrangements, including contingency plans, carried out in peacetime—the scale of the work is unprecedented. He will be pleased to learn that the Government have already set in hand a thorough process of assessment, so that we can learn as much as possible from the experience of those weeks and months, and that we intend to make that information available.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his interest and for the support that he has shown in this issue. As he has asked me about the things that we can learn, and as it is the eve of Christmas, I thought that I would share with the House one of the more interesting pieces of information made available to me. It is that in its testing of non-critical systems, Customs and Excise has included the need to test the hairdryer for sniffer dogs. Its continuity plan is that if it fails, it will use a towel.

BILLS PRESENTED

Medical Treatment (Prevention of Euthanasia)

Mrs. Ann Winterton, supported by Mr. Joe Benton, Mr. Julian Brazier, Dr. Vincent Cable, Mr. Jim Dobbin, Dr. Brian Iddon, Mr. Kerry Pollard, Mrs. Marion Roe, Rev. Martin Smyth, Miss Ann Widdecombe, Mr. Nicholas Winterton and Mr. William Cash, presented a Bill to prohibit the withdrawal or withholding of medical treatment, or the withdrawal or withholding of sustenance, with the intention of causing the death of

[Mrs. Beckett]

a patient; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 28 January, and to be printed [Bill 12].

CARERS AND DISABLED CHILDREN

Mr. Tom Pendry, supported by Mr. David Hinchliffe, Mrs. Llin Golding, Mrs. Virginia Bottomley, Mr. Stephen Dorrell, Mrs. Marion Roe, Mr. David Chaytor, Jackie Ballard, Mrs. Sylvia Heal, Mr. Andrew F. Bennett, Mr. Andrew Reed and Mr. Lawrie Quinn, presented a Bill to make provision about the assessment of carers' needs; to provide for services to help carers; to provide for the making of payments to carers and disabled children aged 16 or 17 in lieu of the provision of services to them; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February, and to be printed [Bill 13].

LICENSING (YOUNG PERSONS)

Mr. Paul Truswell, supported by Mr. Fabian Hamilton, Mr. Harold Best, Mr. Colin Burgon, Mr. John Gunnell, Mr. George Mudie, Mr. Hilary Benn, Ms Chris McCafferty, Mr. Christopher Leslie and Mr. David Taylor, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the sale and consumption of intoxicating liquor in cases involving persons under 18; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 11 February, and to be printed [Bill 14].

HEALTH SERVICE COMMISSIONERS (AMENDMENT)

Sir Peter Emery, on behalf of Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith, supported by Mr. Menzies Campbell, Mr. Alan Williams, Dr. Howard Stoate, Dr. Peter Brand, Angela Smith, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Marsha Singh and Mr. David Hinchliffe, presented a Bill to amend the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March, and to be printed [Bill 15].

WARM HOMES AND ENERGY CONSERVATION

Mr. David Amess, supported by Mr. David Atkinson, Mr. Simon Burns, Mr. David Chaytor, Mr. Michael Colvin, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Mrs. Linda Gilroy, Ms Jenny Jones, Mr. Alan Simpson, Rev. Martin Smyth, Sir Teddy Taylor and Mr. Paul Tyler, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to draw up and facilitate the carrying out of a programme of action to provide households with a comprehensive package of home insulation, heating and other energy efficiency improvements for the purpose of reducing fuel poverty; to require the setting of targets for the achievement of that programme; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 10 March, and to be printed [Bill 16].

GOVERNMENT POWERS (LIMITATIONS)

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith, supported by Mr. John Bercow, Mr. John Whittingdale, Mr. Quentin Davies, Mr. Eric Forth, Mr. Gerald Howarth, Mr. Robert Key, Mr. Richard Ottaway, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Mr. Bernard Jenkin, Dr. Julian Lewis and Mr. Oliver Letwin, presented a Bill to amend the law in relation to the permitted number of Ministers of the Crown; to limit the powers of Ministers to make certain appointments; to make provision with respect to the parliamentary scrutiny of European Union proposals and other subordinate legislation; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 April, and to be printed [Bill 17].

URBAN REGENERATION AND COUNTRYSIDE PROTECTION

Mr. Anthony Steen, supported by Mr. Tony Baldry, Mr. Martin Bell, Mr. Crispin Blunt, Mr. Kenneth Clarke, Sir Peter Emery, Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith, Mr. Tom King, Mr. Peter Lilley, Mr. Peter Luff, Mr. Patrick Nicholls and Sir Michael Spicer, presented a Bill to require local planning authorities to undertake urban capacity studies and to publish audits of derelict, vacant, under-used and under-utilised buildings and land; to place a duty on public bodies to maximise the use of previously developed buildings and land; to impose new requirements in respect of planning applications for housing development on undeveloped land or for housing development likely to have a significant impact on existing infrastructure; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed [Bill 18].

WILD MAMMALS (HUNTING WITH DOGS)

Mr. Ken Livingstone, supported by Mr. Kevin McNamara, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Mike Hancock, Mr. Michael J. Foster, Jackie Ballard, Ms Glenda Jackson, Mr. Norman Baker, Mr. Roger Gale, Mr. Ian Cawsey, Dr. Ian Gibson and Mr. Tony Banks, presented a Bill to make provision for the protection of wild mammals from being hunted by the use of dogs; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 April, and to be printed [Bill 19].

EXPORT OF FARM ANIMALS

Mr. Gwyn Prosser, supported by Jackie Ballard, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Vernon Coaker, Mr. Bill Etherington, Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick, Mrs. Eileen Gordon, Mr. Mike Hancock, Mr. Nigel Jones, Laura Moffatt, Dr. Nick Palmer and Angela Smith, presented a Bill to prohibit the export of live farm animals for slaughter or further fattening; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February, and to be printed [Bill 20].

FOOD LABELLING

Mr. Stephen O'Brien, supported by Mr. Peter Atkinson, Mr. Ian Davidson, Mr. Jim Dobbin, Mr. Christopher Fraser, Mr. James Gray, Mr. John Hayes, Mrs. Eleanor Laing, Mr. Owen Paterson, Mr. David Prior, Mr. John Randall and Mr. Andrew Stunell, presented a Bill to make further provision for consumers of food to be informed about the country of origin and standards of production of food presented for sale by labelling, marking or in other ways; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March, and to be printed [Bill 21].

SEX DISCRIMINATION (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Robert Walter, supported by Sir John Stanley, Mr. Derek Wyatt, Mr. John Burnett, Miss Anne

McIntosh, Sir David Madel, Mr. David Curry, Mr. Peter Luff, Mr. Anthony Steen, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Ms Claire Ward and Mrs. Llin Golding, presented a Bill to amend the Sex Discrimination Act 1975; to make provision with respect to discrimination concerning the provision of goods, facilities, services and access to governance by private member clubs; and to continue to permit wholly single-sex clubs and sporting events: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 11 February, and to be printed [Bill 22].

Building Societies (Transfer Resolutions)

Mr. Tony McWalter, supported by Charlotte Atkins, Mr. David Heath, Mr. Andrew Love, Ms Christine Russell, Mr. Doug Naysmith, Ms Judith Church, Mr. David Crausby and Mr. Hilton Dawson, presented a Bill to amend the Building Societies Act 1986 in respect of resolutions at meetings of building societies relating to the transfer of the business of a building society to a commercial company or to another building society and in respect of share rights on transfer of business to a commercial company: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March, and to be printed [Bill 23].

Welfare of Broiler Chickens

Ann Clwyd, supported by Mr. Colin Burgon, Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours, Mr. Harry Cohen, Mrs. Joan Humble, Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Ms Julie Morgan, Mr. Brian Sedgemore, Dr. Howard Stoate and Mr. Alan Williams, presented a Bill to make provision with respect to the health and welfare of broiler chickens kept in indoor husbandry systems: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February, and to be printed [Bill 24].

Newspaper and Magazine Recycling

Dr. Doug Naysmith, supported by Mr. Roger Berry, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Tom Brake, Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. David Chaytor, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Valerie Davey, Ms Julia Drown, Mr. Don Foster, Mrs. Diana Organ and Mr. Gordon Prentice, presented a Bill to make provision with respect to the collection and recycling of newspapers and magazines in England and Wales: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 11 February, and to be printed [Bill 25].

Health and Safety At Work (Offences)

Mr. Malcolm Savidge, supported by Mr. Tony Baldry, Miss Anne Begg, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Dr. Vincent Cable, Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson, Mr. Frank Doran, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mr. Martin O'Neill, Ms Linda Perham, Ms Helen Southworth and Mr. David Stewart, presented a Bill to make provision about the prosecution and punishment of offences which are, or are being treated as being, offences under the Health and Safety at Work, etc Act 1974 or the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 11 February, and to be printed [Bill 26].

Organic Food and Farming Targets

Mr. Paul Tyler, supported by Mr. Tom King, Mr. Tony Benn, Mr. Colin Breed, Joan Ruddock, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Peter Bradley, Mr. Harry Barnes, Mr. James Gray, Mr. David Drew, Mr. Lembit Öpik and Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, presented a Bill to make provision regarding the setting and achievement of targets for organic farming and food consumption; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March, and to be printed [Bill 27].

Fire Prevention

Mr. Peter L. Pike, supported by Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick, Mr. Tony Lloyd, Mr. Lawrie Quinn, Mr. Gordon Prentice, Mr. Bob Russell, Mr. Peter Luff, Ms Dari Taylor, Mr. James Gray, Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, Mr. Eric Illsley and Mr. Stephen McCabe, presented a Bill to extend the duties of fire authorities in respect of fire prevention: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February, and to be printed [Bill 28].

Road Traffic

Mrs. Eleanor Laing, supported by Mr. John MacGregor, Sir George Young, Mr. Patrick McLoughlin, Mr. Oliver Letwin, Mr. Bernard Jenkin, Mr. Tim Boswell, Mr. James Gray, Mr. Desmond Swayne, Mr. Stephen O'Brien and Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, presented a Bill to make further provision about the enforcement of requirements relating to drivers' hours and about the licensing of the operators of goods vehicles; to make provision with respect to the exemption of essential users of commercial motor vehicles and operators of certain community bus services from payment of excise duty on fuel; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March, and to be printed [Bill 29].

Property Transactions

Mr. Bowen Wells, supported by Mr. Tony Baldry, Mr. Simon Burns, Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mr. Michael Mates and Mr. Ian Taylor, presented a Bill to make provision about property transactions: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 May, and to be printed [Bill 30].

Protection of Animals (Amendment)

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas, supported by Mr. Gwyn Prosser, Mr. Michael J. Foster, Mr. Michael Jabez Foster, Mr. Colin Pickthall, Maria Eagle and Mrs. Betty Williams, presented a Bill to enable provision to be made for the care, disposal or slaughter of animals to which proceedings under section 1 of the Protection of Animals Act 1911 relate; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 28 January, and to be printed [Bill 31].

Orders of the Day

Business of the House

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [15 December],

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any messages from the Lords shall have been received.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

4.4 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): As I was saying last night, I do not criticise the Leader of the House for her non-attendance in the debate, even if the motion was in her name. I pay tribute to the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, who dealt courteously with several matters in the previous debate and is in his place, ready, I hope, to deal with the matter under consideration. I do not criticise the Leader of the House in that respect, but, as the motion was in her name, it would have been particularly helpful if she had been present, or indeed, if the Parliamentary Secretary had on her behalf set out the reasons for the motion.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a tendency? Does he recall that in Monday's debate on the Adjournment, when precedent suggested that the Leader of the House should be in her place, the Minister was present, but not the Leader?

Mr. Forth: My right hon. and learned Friend is correct. Although we acknowledge that the Leader of the House is a very busy person and carries onerous responsibilities, nevertheless I should have thought that her eminent position encouraged her to be present for such procedural motions. They may not look particularly important, but we know that they can be extraordinarily important in determining the order of business.

Having had no guidance at all from those on the Government Front Bench, we are left to speculate on the meaning of the motion. I turned to "Erskine May", which is the last resort—or, for many, the first resort—when seeking to elucidate the mysteries of a motion, especially a procedural motion, such as the one under discussion. I shall share with the House, just for a short time, the entries that I found in "Erskine May" relating to messages. The nature of the messages is crucial. As we have been given no indication of the nature of the messages, "Erskine May" may help us.

I started with page 284, which helpfully tells us that when messages arise, they come after Prayers, business taken immediately after Prayers, questions and business taken after questions. That raises a number of interesting questions about the day. I assume—I could be wrong, but I am making the working assumption—that on the day in question, that is, tomorrow, we will get all the usual matters of business, with the possibility of the messages arriving.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is it not possible that the Leader of the House, as a result of a particularly pressing engagement, has absented herself, but only temporarily, and that we might reasonably hope—especially if my right hon. Friend is wise enough to pursue his remarks at a leisurely pace—to observe her return before long?

Mr. Forth: That must be our fervent wish, without wanting to detract in any way from the Parliamentary Secretary, who is in his place as ever, jovial as ever, and anxious to help, as ever he is. I have a modest list of questions, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman will want to answer.

My first question is: do we anticipate a normal day's business, possibly leading up to the receipt of Lords messages?

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I notice that my right hon. Friend quoted from page 284 of "Erskine May" and pointed out that item 6 of business taken after questions was consideration of Lords amendments. Has he noticed, however, that item 5 is personal statements? Might the motion be in preparation for the Chancellor coming tomorrow to make a personal statement about the erroneous statements that he made in the House recently?

Mr. Forth: Would that it were so. I go even further and say that I should like the Prime Minister to elucidate for the House some of the grotesque errors that he has made, no doubt inadvertently, at the Dispatch Box, including not a few this very day. We live in hope of that.

The scene is set by the apparently innocuous motion for various possibilities to arise. On page 610 of "Erskine May", I found some helpful information, as one would expect. I shall read a brief extract, as I do not want to detain the House unduly. Under the general heading "Communications between the Lords and the Commons"—

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm for those who are fortunate enough to observe our proceedings that they are witnessing a classic filibuster?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Such matters can safely be left to the Chair.

Mr. Forth: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not mean to suggest that a motion that has been properly tabled and, so far, properly debated, is an abuse of the House. I hope that he does not suggest that such matters should not be debated.

I shall return to "Erskine May" and quote from it in a spirit of helpfulness. On page 610, under the heading "Communications between the Lords and the Commons", it states:

"The two Houses of Parliament have frequent occasion to communicate with each other, not only in regard to bills which require the assent of both Houses, but with reference to other matters connected with the proceedings of Parliament."

That partially answers one of the questions that I asked earlier. I was speculating, probably rather wildly, that an accelerated legislative process lay behind the apparently innocent motion. It now appears that there is no such intention—perhaps the Minister can confirm that, and that we are probably considering

"other matters connected with the proceedings of Parliament."

That gives us a clue that we can work on in the absence of guidance from the Minister.

Under the heading "Messages"—we may be getting a bit warmer—"Erskine May" states:

"A message is the most simple mode of communication; it is frequently resorted to, for sending bills from one House to another"—

we have partially eliminated that possibility—

"for the interchange of reports and other documents, for communicating about joint committees or private bills, or for requesting the presence of a Member or Officer of one House, to give evidence before the other House".

It is therefore entirely possible, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) suggested, that the other place could send a message to summon the Prime Minister or the Chancellor to explain the misinformation that has flowed from the Government, not least from Nos. 10 and 11, in the past two and a half years. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his suggestion.

Mr. Hogg: Another possibility is that the other place wants to hear from the Deputy Prime Minister his reasons for believing that it is proper for the new Minister of Transport to be a Member of another place, and not accountable to hon. Members in this House.

Mr. Forth: That suggests some intriguing possibilities. More and more Ministers are in another place, and a peculiarly large percentage are from Scotland. I cannot begin to imagine the reason for that, although I am sure that they are people of great integrity and of even greater ability. I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his suggestion. The nature of the relationship within Government between the two Houses of Parliament may emerge from passing messages back and forth, for which the motion provides.

I move on to page 611.

Mr. Maclean: The crucial page.

Mr. Forth: I should warn the House that I have not got into my stride yet; I am still on my preliminary remarks.

Page 611 of "Erskine May" states:

"In the Commons the reception of a message from the Lords is recorded in the Votes and Proceedings and the Journal, and any action required to be taken is normally set down for a subsequent day."

That is interesting because the subsequent day cannot be Friday 17 December as the House is not sitting. By implication, it will have to be the following Monday. In the absence of knowledge about next Monday's exact business, we are left to speculate that if a message from the Lords, which resulted from the motion, contained anything that required action, it would be

"set down for a subsequent day."

The motion does not necessarily relate to the business for one day; it could affect at least two parliamentary days. That really has surprised me, because on my initial reading of the motion I thought that only a day's business would be affected. Does not that show the value of "Erskine May"?

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way. As there will be no further Prime Minister's questions before the House rises for Christmas, is it not especially significant that any Lords message might facilitate a statement by the Prime Minister on either Monday or Tuesday next week because that would enable him to put the record straight on taxation? My right hon. Friend, with his encyclopaedic memory, will recall that the Prime Minister said on 21 September 1996 that Labour had no plans to raise taxes at all, whereas today, very significantly, he did not use the words "at all" at any stage—only, and rather frequently, the word "actually".

Mr. Forth: I was not in my usual place, for reasons that I shall not go into, but I was in the Chamber and I heard the Prime Minister say that. Now that my memory has been jogged, I recall what he said previously. It is possible that such a statement might be made, but I think that my hon. Friend is falling into his usual optimism in expecting one. Be that as it may, we are left with a teasing conundrum: we not only have no idea of the content of the messages, but were we to approve the motion—which is no foregone conclusion—it may affect tomorrow's business and the business for a subsequent day. That is what "Erskine May", at page 611, allows.

We have made some progress because we have an idea of the possible scope of the business and the messages, and we know that two days business, instead of one, could be affected. I want to round off these comments by referring back to page 545 of "Erskine May", which also deals with Bills, although I think that I have, almost to my own satisfaction, eliminated the introduction of a Bill as a possibility. However, for the sake of completeness, "Erskine May" says:

"The Lords ordinarily send their bills to the Commons by the Clerk of the Parliaments, or by a clerk deputed for the purpose. When the bill has originated in the Lords a message is sent to the Commons desiring their agreement."

That reintroduces the possibility of a Bill—perhaps an emergency Bill or a surprise Bill of some kind—being introduced in the other place that may be sent to the House of Commons by message or through that process. That is rather less likely and, to set our minds at ease, perhaps the Parliamentary Secretary might rule it out categorically. He is in possession of much more information about what is happening in the other place, particularly with regard to Government business, although he may not be able to be absolutely categoric about private Member's business there.

Mr. Hogg: There is, of course, a further possibility that my right hon. Friend might care to bear in mind. The other place may want to communicate with the House to the effect that certain Bills now proceeding through the House are not sufficiently well thought out to justify their further progress until there has been yet further consultation. Speaking for myself, in relation to the Terrorism Bill, which was discussed last night, might not the other place like there to be further consultation before it makes further progress in the House? There could be messages from the other place about a multitude of Bills which we know the Government have in mind.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. and learned Friend has raised an intriguing possibility. Does it not highlight the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the two Houses of the legislature? There can be such intercourse

[Mr. Forth]

between the two purveyed by messages, as the motion suggests. Even on a day such as tomorrow, which the casual observer might think is one on which not much would happen in the House—

Mr. Maclean: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: Yes, but I shall be concluding my remarks shortly.

Mr. Maclean: Although most observers might think that tomorrow will be a quiet day, the last paragraph of page 611 of "Erskine May" says:

"If it is necessary in the Commons to proceed upon a Lords' message on the day of its reception, the Speaker informs the House between the orders of the day (or may even interrupt the business under discussion)"

and

"the House having ordered the Lords' message to be read and considered . . . motions are made and questions put from the Chair".

Has my right hon. Friend considered the possibility that the Government anticipate important messages from the Lords tomorrow and intend to bounce the House by putting important questions from the Chair on a day when they expect slack attendance?

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend has typically teased out a point that had escaped my attention. I had not realised the importance of that paragraph on page 611 of "Erskine May", because I had been concentrating on the previous paragraph. My right hon. Friend may expand on that point if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because he has obviously given it more consideration than I have been able to do in my brief preparation for this important debate.

I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you will agree that we have identified under this motion some possibilities that deserve a brief debate, and certainly merit an explanation from the Minister. Were the Government to decide, unusually for them, that in future they will do the House the courtesy of explaining briefly their intentions in these procedural motions, it could save time. By not doing so, they display the arrogance of assuming that we will nod everything through. They have made sinister references to the usual channels, which they seem to think determine what happens in the House. If I do nothing else, I should like to disabuse them of that.

Mr. Hogg: The important point about the usual channels is that, although Front Benchers can commit themselves, they cannot necessarily commit their Back Benchers.

Mr. Forth: That is the case on the Conservative Benches, but it remains to be seen whether it is also the case on the Government Benches. That is the valuable point that I hope will emerge from this brief debate.

Should the Minister catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I hope that he will be able to satisfy me, if no one else, on the points that I have raised, so that I can decide whether I think the House should divide on this issue to express its view. I believe that that is a modest request.

4.22 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): There are some important issues to be dealt with in the motion. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) dealt with them last night and, more particularly, today. The House knows that my right hon. Friend has drastically telescoped his remarks so that they do not interfere with our consideration of the important Bill that is before us today.

Opposition Members who are present on Fridays—my right hon. Friend and I are often here on a Friday—will realise that, had my right hon. Friend wished to pursue these matters in much greater depth, the House would be discussing them for a few more hours. If some of my right hon. and hon. Friends came to assist him, we could be debating the motion until 10 o'clock tonight. However, it is not my right hon. Friend's intention, nor is it mine, to prolong these proceedings unnecessarily.

I hope that Labour Members have learned an important little lesson from our brief discussion of this motion last night and today. The Minister is an honourable, decent man, and I suspect that he listened to the advice of the champagne socialists in the Whips Office sitting on the Front Bench with him, who told him, "Bounce it through on the nod and keep your mouth shut. Don't say a word. It's late at night and they all want to go home to bed. Just put it through without explanation." It may have seemed good advice at the time, but I suggest to the Minister that it is not the way to proceed if he wants such motions put through reasonably quickly.

Mr. Forth: Has my right hon. Friend thought about what might happen if a message from the other place had to be dealt with by a Minister in this House who was at that very time engaged in the Disneyland Chamber that we mistakenly set up somewhere off Westminster Hall? Has he thought of the procedural implications that could arise from a message from the other place, were the relevant Minister to be wasting his time in futile debate in a pretend Chamber?

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is right. I am not sure whether the Serjeant at Arms could extract a Minister from the banana republic parish council that we have created above the Westminster Hall Cafeteria and bring him to the Chamber so that he could deal with a message. I do not want to pursue that, but the Modernisation Committee may wish to.

Mr. Hogg: My right hon. Friend is conveying his own messages to the Government Front Bench about the dangers of taking the House for granted. One message that he may wish to convey is this: if Ministers ever seek to provide Government time for the promotion of a private Member's Bill that would infringe the rights of my constituents, they can be sure that every parliamentary opportunity will be taken by Members who defend human rights.

Mr. Maclean: I think that we have all noted the underlying point made by my right hon. and learned Friend. I look forward to seeing him here every Friday in future when private Member's business is being dealt with. I also look forward to co-operating with the Government to ensure that the rights of all our constituents are protected, at least for the time being, until important inquiries are completed.

I was making a straightforward point. The Government will be able to conclude their business more quickly if they do the House the small courtesy of explaining what are, in some cases, simple and innocuous measures. If they do not do that, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and I, along with others, will conclude that they may have a more devious and sinister purpose, and will wish to explore what they are up to in more detail.

Let me give the Minister a good reason for not obeying his Whips Office in future, but trusting his own instinct and judgment, jumping to the Dispatch Box and telling the House what the Government are doing. A late lamented Transport Minister—I believe that she was once an actress—did not appreciate that, to get a Bill through the House on a Friday, she must treat the House with a certain courtesy. She became rather grumpy when a Bill that she hoped would be bounced through in 10 minutes took about five hours to debate because the House was giving it proper scrutiny.

That lady is no longer a member of the Government, which is a source of concern to some of us who would like to oppose some of her other transport measures. Because she treated the House with discourtesy and contempt, she did not win favours from her own Back Benchers. If the Minister wishes to earn favours from his Back Benchers, to conclude business by 10 pm and to get it passed, a simple explanation at the outset would be helpful. It is not good enough for him to explain that a measure is innocuous after Opposition Members have made their speeches.

I urge the Minister in future to tell us what a motion is about at the beginning, so that we do not have to drag it out of him at the end.

4.28 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The House should be grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) for taking the opportunity to clarify, or at least to seek to clarify, the purpose that lies behind the motion. He has also done something else, which the Government would do well to consider: he has made it clear that, if the Government ever act in a way that is not consistent with what hon. Members think to be right, a range of possibilities are open to hon. Members to put obstacles in the way of business, and to do so in a way that is proper.

I was here earlier when the private Members' Bills were introduced. I noticed that they included the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill. Any attempt to bang that Bill through the House will attract a great deal of discussion on every possible occasion. I will not be alone in going a long way to ensure the rights of our constituents to go fox hunting.

My other point is made in the spirit of helpfulness. The Order Paper often contains motions, the impact of which is unclear. I congratulate the Government on the new Order Paper, which is an improvement on what we had in the past, but it would be helpful if it gave some indication of the purpose and impact of many of the orders that we are asked to pass on the nod. The usual channels could have a profitable discussion about that. If the impact of some of the motions and orders could be set out, perhaps in an appendix, Members of Parliament such as me would have a clearer view of what we are being asked to do and we might well find that, on occasions such as this, business would pass through the House more expeditiously.

I am delighted to know that there are agreements between the Front Benches. That has always been so. However, as the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) said last night, some of us feel that the rights of Back Benchers can never be compromised by agreements between Front Benchers. Front Benchers speak for themselves, but they do not necessarily speak for their Back Benchers.

4.31 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): There are occasions in the House when I am reminded of Richter's words to the third flute:

"Your damned nonsense can I stand twice or once, but sometimes always, by God, never."

My right hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) have demonstrated that poachers can certainly make good gamekeepers and gamekeepers can make even better poachers, because they have been usual channels in the past. They have performed a valuable service to the House this afternoon, because they have given the Government a timely warning. One can have no objection to the measure that we are debating, but the Government should be careful about trying to slip things through too quickly.

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I apologise to the House for being a poor substitute for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I shall pass on the good wishes that have been expressed to her. Hon. Members will recognise that she is a regular, courteous and punctilious Member of the House.

The motion was debated for a limited period last night and for a slightly extended period today. The phrase "teased out" has been used several times. Some of my hon. Friends will feel that some teasing has gone on.

Let me try to set the record straight. The motion allows the Speaker not to adjourn the House tomorrow until any messages have been received from the Lords. The matter was referred to in last week's business statement, when no objections were raised.

There is nothing new in the procedure that we are advocating. There is a long-established practice of facilitating the quick and easy passage of the Consolidated Fund Bill, which will be before the House tomorrow. I anticipate that we may receive messages from the Lords by the end of the day.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Tipping: I am keen to make progress. There has been plenty of teasing.

With that explanation, I hope that we can move on to the Representation of the People Bill and making sure that this Parliament is for the people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any messages from the Lords shall have been received.

Representation of the People Bill

Considered in Committee.

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Ordered,

That the Bill be considered in the following order, namely: Clauses 1 to 8, Schedules 1 to 3, Clauses 9 to 12, Clauses 13 to 16, Schedules 5 and 6.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien]*

Clause 1

NEW SYSTEM OF ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

4.34 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I beg to move amendment No. 29, in page 1, line 17, leave out from beginning to "and" in line 18.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 31, in page 2, line 6, leave out from beginning to "and" in line 7.

No. 34, in page 2, line 23, leave out from beginning to "and" in line 24.

No. 36, in page 2, line 38, leave out from beginning to "and" in line 39.

Mr. Barnes: The Bill extends the scope of the franchise to homeless persons through a declaration of local connection, to those remanded in custody and not yet convicted and to patients resident in mental hospitals who are not detained offenders. I support all those measures. However, if the franchise can be extended to those categories, are there not some other categories that we might consider for such an extension? My amendments would extend the franchise to overseas citizens resident in this country, in addition to the Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens who already qualify if they reside here. I understand that it would amount to about 850,000 people.

The franchise should not go to people of voting age unless they live in a society that is making legislation that affects them. There might be a limited number of exceptions to that, such as people in such a condition that they cannot exercise a vote. Later in the Bill, we will be discussing the opposition to registration of overseas electors, and the same principle will apply. I am talking about enfranchising people of qualifying age who are members of a society with a parliamentary governmental structure that makes decisions affecting their lives. That should include people from overseas who are resident in this country but are not citizens of the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland, but exclude people from this country who go overseas and who should be subject to the same principle in the country in which they settle.

I seek to enfranchise people who are dependent on decisions made by elected representatives on laws, basic services, environmental protection, health and safety provision, taxation and economic prosperity. Those are all things dealt with by the House. They affect the lives of anyone who has settled in this country from overseas but not taken British citizenship.

Welcome though these measures are, I want the Minister to explain why the Bill goes only part of the way to overcoming the current disenfranchisement problems. Perhaps we should consider enfranchising other groups, such as prisoners. After all, the powers of the law affect them closely. Why are citizens of the Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland enfranchised in this country when other overseas residents are not?

The Commonwealth has been expanding recently. In 1990, Namibia joined the Commonwealth; in 1994, South Africa re-entered; in 1995, Mozambique and the Cameroons joined; and Fiji rejoined in 1997. Therefore, people from those countries who have settled in the United Kingdom are now entitled to be enfranchised here.

If a country should leave the Commonwealth, people from that country who are settled in the United Kingdom will lose their entitlement to enfranchisement here. No great feat of logic is necessary to appreciate that consequence of a country leaving the Commonwealth.

As the Commonwealth expands, ever more people who settle in the United Kingdom will acquire the right to vote here. However, the Commonwealth will not expand indefinitely, until it comprises every country on earth. Furthermore, such a peculiar development should not be necessary to ensure that people living here receive what should be an entitlement.

I therefore ask the Committee to accept that everyone who is affected by the laws passed by this place should be able to have their say in elections, as those elections will affect their lives.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, but concede that there is some intellectual force in his argument. However, is he suggesting that the right to vote should be extended to overseas persons who have been here but for a very short time, or is he saying that there should be an extended requirement of residence in the United Kingdom as a precondition to enjoying the franchise?

Mr. Barnes: The arrangements for residents from places other than the Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland should—as my amendments propose—be the same as those for Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman feels that the current arrangements for Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens are too easy, perhaps an appropriate amendment should be tabled.

My aim is a simple one: to clarify the principle by which the franchise is granted.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): One approaches any amendment moved by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) with respect, for he has a long history of being concerned with the franchise and has given considerable thought to these matters. However, I am not entirely persuaded that, on this occasion, he is on the right lines.

In supporting his suggestion that we should extend the franchise to all United Kingdom residents, the hon. Gentleman seemed to be citing anomalous arrangements—in some respects, they are anomalous—that allow the franchise to be exercised by citizens of the Republic of Ireland and of Commonwealth countries, and suggesting that we should extend the franchise to the point at which the link between the citizen and the state ceases in any real sense to be the reason for entitlement to exercise the franchise.

Although I do not think that, in the ambit of amendment No. 29, it is necessary to consider the appropriateness of permitting Commonwealth citizens to vote here, in his reply to the debate, the Minister may want to say at least something on the issue.

The link between the citizen and the state is a reciprocal one: the state has the duty to look after its citizens, and the citizen must exercise his or her duty to be interested in how that service is provided. The notion of citizenship would be under challenge, perhaps even under threat, if that very considerable right were partly diminished by being no longer a characteristic of citizenship, but simply the happenstance of residence.

4.45 pm

The basis of the hon. Gentleman's case is that those who are affected by government should have a right to choose the Government. That is not the basis of the duty and the right to vote as I see it. Many people affected by the Government may not be resident within the United Kingdom. Many people who are not resident but who are citizens may be affected in so far as, for example, tax and inheritance laws and the ownership of property here are concerned. Their entitlement to vote rests upon their link with this state as citizens. I wish that position to be preserved.

We shall return to the subject of foreign entitlement to vote. However, the hon. Gentleman has raised an important question about the somewhat anomalous situation of those who are entitled to vote but who are not citizens. We should consider whether we should tackle that matter. It is perhaps strange that, as he put it, citizens of Namibia should be entitled to vote but not citizens of France. After all, the latter belong to a polity, if not a state, with which we have close—almost constant—exchanges and it is conceivable that, if the offer that Mr. Winston Churchill made to the French Government in 1940 had been picked up by the then Prime Minister, we would have enjoyed common citizenship. I do not know what the Conservative party feels with the benefit of hindsight about relations with France—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Would the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is particularly important as we debate the Bill that no one either deliberately or inadvertently misrepresents the greatest Englishman of the 20th century? Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the late Sir Winston Churchill said of Europe and Britain's relationship with it:

"We are with Europe but not of it. We are linked, but not comprised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed."

Mr. Maclennan: I merely repeat my reminder that Mr. Churchill, as he then was, made that bold, imaginative and historically percipient offer of common citizenship to the French, which they did not choose to accept. In his view of what it was to be British, he was not exclusive, as some members of the Conservative party are today.

The question of the entitlement of European Union citizens to participate in votes in each other's countries is growing in importance. That question has already been tackled for local government elections, where somewhat different conclusions have been arrived at, and it is time that we tackled it for national elections.

The amendment weakens the significance of citizenship and would, to some extent, sever an important link in the minds of British people to what it means to be British—the duty of voting for the Government or against is something that they should value and see as a duty that stems from the fact that they enjoy the privileges associated with British citizenship. Without more argument, I could not find it within myself to support the amendment.

Mr. Hogg: I support what the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) has said. I respect the view of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes)—there is an intellectual case to be made for it. However, his proposal is quite a serious mistake, and I have three points on which he might like to reflect.

First, if we were starting from scratch, we probably would not extend the franchise to citizens of the Commonwealth or Ireland. Their right to vote has happened for historical reasons, but it is quite difficult, if one sets about defining why people should have the vote, to say with any great confidence that citizens of Ireland or the Commonwealth should have it. Therefore, I do not start with that fact as the working assumption of what is right and proper.

That takes me to my second point, where I am, rather unusually, largely in agreement with the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. I think that the right of voting—the duty to vote—runs with citizenship. It is part of that relationship with society that involves affinity and allegiance; it is part of being a member of a society. I do not think that the right to vote should go beyond that. I certainly do not think that it should arise simply from the fact that a person is affected by the consequences of legislation.

One has only to reflect on this fact to see the force of what I have just said: anybody who passes through the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom, for even the shortest time, is affected by our criminal law. It would be absurd to say that, because anybody who passes through the jurisdiction is touched by the criminal law, such a person should, if he or she happens to be here at an appointed time, have the right to vote.

That takes me to my third point—I am putting my argument very briefly. I mean no disrespect to the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire when I say that his proposed qualification for the franchise is met by casual residents only. He would have a much stronger case if he argued that the overseas citizen who had been here for an extended qualifying period—we can discuss what that should be—should have a right to vote. That person then has some of the characteristics of being part of the society, although such status falls short of being a citizen.

For those three reasons, I cannot support the hon. Gentleman's amendment, although I do not say that his case is wholly without intellectual force.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I support the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), and I have a few questions for the Minister.

First, given the improving relationships between the people in Ireland, north and south of the border, do the Government have any plans, and is there any work in

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

train, to give to United Kingdom citizens living in the Irish Republic the voting rights that Irish citizens have when they live in the United Kingdom?

When the Minister was on the working party, he must have received more papers on reciprocal voting rights than on anything else. How many other Commonwealth countries, if any, give resident United Kingdom citizens the right to vote? Do the Government have any plans for that to be rationalised? Has it been taken up in the Commonwealth conference or by the Commonwealth Secretariat?

The linked question touches on points raised by my right hon. Friend and the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). Do the Government believe that, no matter which other new countries might join the Commonwealth—for example, two recent new members have not been part of the usual Commonwealth tradition—the right of those citizens to vote here will be retained?

Finally, I have many Irish citizens and Commonwealth non-UK citizens in my constituency. When they reside here and go on the electoral register for the first time or when, as Commonwealth citizens, they come into the country to settle, does anyone ever tell them that they have a right to vote? When they appear for the first time on the electoral register, is any effort made to tell them their right, what the process and the methodology is, and what the implications are? Some of the people on my electoral roll who vote least are those who are entitled to do so, but are not United Kingdom citizens. That includes Irish and Commonwealth citizens—especially Commonwealth citizens—who probably do not know that they are entitled to be on the register, but who would put themselves on if they were encouraged more clearly to do so.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question can be seen from the surprised look on the faces of Australians and many others when one tells them that, if they were registered, they could vote in this country. No one ever tells them that, and it comes to all of them as a complete surprise.

Mr. Hughes: That is the impression that I get. I know that we all get the form through the letter box and that the small print says, "UK, Irish or Commonwealth citizen," but, as an honest seeker after truth, I suggest to the Minister that we ought to have a system that works and that the people who have entitlements under it understand.

Mr. Bercow: While I understand the force of what the hon. Gentleman says about informing people of their entitlement, I am less clear why he believes that that category of persons should be informed of, as he put it, the implications of their vote. Is it really necessary to create a different category of electors? That would be the result of the logic of what he is saying.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman misinterprets my logic. UK citizens who are born and grow up here, if our system works, should have been taught, by the time that they leave school and are entitled to vote, about voting and citizenship, and the implications of them. If people are brought up in another country and come later in life to this country, they may not have been taught about the implications of citizenship in the UK. My suggestion is not meant to be heavier than that. It seems that, when people of certain nationalities cross the border, nothing automatically tells them what coming to settle here entitles them to.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I intend to keep my comments brief, but I am bound to say that I share the view of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) that the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) is one with which I cannot agree. However, the hon. Gentleman is certainly right to point out the anomaly in relation to the existing law on Commonwealth citizens and citizens of the Irish Republic.

Before I looked at the totality of the hon. Gentleman's amendments on the amendment paper, I wondered whether he was proposing to delete the right of Commonwealth and Irish citizens to the franchise. That is a view with which I would have been unable to agree. It is perhaps worth bearing it in mind that, certainly in my constituency, the issue tends to be raised frequently. People ask why Commonwealth and Irish citizens should have the vote.

What appears to have happened—I shall be interested if the Minister will confirm this—is that, at one time, Commonwealth or Irish citizenship virtually entitled a person as of right to a British passport once he or she was resident here. It is certainly not the case for Commonwealth citizens today although, curiously, it still applies to citizens of the Irish Republic. To all intents and purposes, Irish citizens are treated, if they so elect, as if they were British citizens. They can apply for a passport and obtain one without any difficulty. For Commonwealth citizens, the anomaly remains solely in terms of electoral law.

Mr. Linton: If the hon. Gentleman describes the right as an anomaly, is he suggesting that it should be withdrawn?

Mr. Grieve: It is one with which I am perfectly happy to live, especially in relation to citizens of the Irish Republic, curiously enough, because close links exist between our two countries. They are links of both proximity and interchangeability in terms of travelling back and forth across the Irish sea. In relation to Commonwealth citizens, justification of the anomaly is much more tenuous. Nevertheless, the anomaly has been around for a long time. I am always open to persuasion on the issue from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and from my constituents, but I am happy to live with the anomaly.

5 pm

The amendment proposed by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire would widen the issue much further. I share all the reservations that have been expressed by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan). The amendment would take matters too far; it would allow casual residents to have the vote. We are happy to welcome all sorts of people to our shores, to live in this

country for greater or lesser periods. However, that does not make them citizens of the United Kingdom, any more than we would be citizens of a foreign country if we chose to reside there without obtaining citizenship. Those rights should not be extended. Although, with a caveat to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, I am prepared to live with the existing anomaly, I am certainly not prepared to have it extended further.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Amendments Nos. 29, 31, 34 and 36 affect the rights of people to vote and to register to vote at parliamentary and local elections. The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) seems to be alone in proposing the amendments and may be alone in supporting them.

The issue was discussed by the Select Committee on Home Affairs during 1997 and 1998; the Government responded to the Committee on 26 October 1999. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) put the matter into its historical and intellectual context. Paragraph 118 of the Select Committee's report noted that the Committee did not believe that there was a compelling argument for extending the right to vote. The Government agreed.

The matter was considered by the Home Affairs Committee in the 1982–83 Session, and the then Government accepted the Committee's recommendation that there should be no change. Indeed the then Opposition spokesman on Home Affairs, a Mr. Robert Kilroy-Silk—where is he now?—said:

"We agree with both the recommendation of the Select Committee and the proposal in the White Paper that there shall be no disturbing of the right held by Irish and Commonwealth citizens."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 1984; Vol. 62, c. 1075.]

That statement holds good today.

The amendments are an attempt to widen by about 850,000 the number of people eligible to register to vote, although the working group did not consider that matter. Anyone with a main, or sole, residence in the UK would be eligible to register to vote. The legislation allows for Commonwealth and Irish citizens living here to vote; the amendment would mean that anyone from any part of the world who was living here would get a vote.

I realise that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire has given the matter considerable attention, but he has not fully thought it through. The amendment would mean that the citizenship test would be replaced by a residency test. That could be jeopardised, or further widened, by other measures in the Bill, such as the declaration of local interest. Taken with some of the hon. Gentleman's other amendments, the measure would disenfranchise British citizens who had moved abroad for a period, while enfranchising any Tom, Dick or Harry—I intend no offence to the hon. Gentleman—who had just entered the country.

The hon. Gentleman is not interested in how long such people might have been in the country. Indeed, he even offered amendments to his amendments to try to deal with the problem. At least he realises that there is a problem. However, he is not interested in the length of time that people have lived in the UK. He pays scant regard to the rights of those who were born in this country, lived most of their lives here and paid their taxes here. His later amendments would deny the vote to Mr. Ashcroft, for example, but the first amendment would give the vote to Mr. Fayed, who is not a British citizen.

What about asylum seekers—60,000 of them it is estimated this year? Under the hon. Gentleman's amendment, they would be able to vote. As we know, they tend to congregate in certain parts of the country, so they could determine the results in some key seats. They would also have power disproportionate to the time that they have been in this country. They might be bogus asylum seekers, but they could argue that they are fleeing their homes and that their main residence is in the United Kingdom. To all intents and purposes, they would be correct and they would be given the right to vote as well.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect further on his amendment. If he does not withdraw it and it goes to a vote, I hope that the Government will be consistent and stick to their original intentions.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): I should explain my presence at the Dispatch Box. I am on a no-fee, one-day transfer from the Northern Ireland Office to the Home Office. Whether that transfer is extended may well depend on my performance today.

I am well aware, as is the whole House, of the interest that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) takes in electoral matters. Members have listened—some slightly more critically than others—to his arguments for his amendment, but when he speaks on electoral matters he does so with sincerity and from a background of considerable knowledge.

I wish to deal with some of the issues raised in the debate before I deal with the substance of my hon. Friend's argument. When he moved the amendment, he implied that, if a country leaves the Commonwealth, its citizens automatically lose the right to vote. Strictly speaking, that is not so. When South Africa, Fiji and Nigeria were suspended from the Commonwealth, their citizens still enjoyed that right. My hon. Friend's assertion does not stand up in those limited circumstances.

My hon. Friend will understand that I am correcting him for the sake of accuracy and not to make clever debating points. However, he suggested that the Bill will extend the franchise to remand prisoners and to mental patients. Again, that is not, strictly speaking, correct. Homeless people, remand prisoners and, for that matter, mental patients already have the right to vote. The Bill's provisions will simply make it easier for them to register and thereby gain access to the vote. I am not making a pedantic point, but it is necessary to make that distinction.

My hon. Friend may not so much have been making an argument as flying a kite when he suggested that it might be possible, or perhaps even right, to consider extending the franchise to convicted prisoners. He may not have meant that as a firm proposal, but as a suggestion it should be considered. However, there is a distinct difference between a remand prisoner and a convicted prisoner. The absence of rights, including the right to vote, is part of the punishment of a convicted prisoner. I can confirm, if any confirmation is necessary, that the Government have no intention of taking up my hon. Friend's proposal. We still believe—and I would be happy to justify this—that it should be part of a convicted prisoner's punishment that he loses rights, and one of them is the right to vote.

The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) made a characteristically interesting speech about the link between duties and rights

[Mr. George Howarth]

and between citizenship and the vote. That was a useful point to make. Alongside rights—including the right to vote—always go obligations, duties and responsibilities and it is right to consider them.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) made an important point: whatever the historical reasons for their existence, the arrangements with the Commonwealth should not necessarily be taken as a precedent for arrangements with other countries that currently do not apply. That was a good point and we should bear it in mind.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) asked several specific questions. I should like to take a little time responding to them. United Kingdom citizens already enjoy full voting rights in the Republic of Ireland, so the reciprocal arrangement to which he referred already exists.

I am not aware of any Commonwealth country that gives UK citizens voting rights in its national elections. Equally, I am not aware that we have ever pushed for any such arrangement. For reasons of history, the position in this country is different from that in former Commonwealth countries; the reverse situation does not apply. Any country that joins the Commonwealth will enjoy all the benefits of membership, including the right to vote in elections.

The hon. Gentleman asked about providing information to people to enable them to understand their specific rights. He will be familiar with the electoral registration form—it goes to every household and makes it clear who is entitled to be registered to vote. In addition, the Home Office conducts general election campaigns, on a non-party political basis, to raise people's awareness of their rights in respect of elections.

I recognise, however, that often not only citizens from the Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland, but people who have an automatic and clear right to vote by virtue of being born and resident here, do not understand what their rights are in relation to voting. That is part of the reason why the Bill exists and was felt to be necessary. I hope that much more information will be available on who is eligible to vote and, where appropriate, information for those who have difficulty reading English to help them to understand their rights.

As regards the substance of the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire, I want to deal with some of the important points that apply. Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, those entitled to vote in parliamentary and local government elections are British citizens, other Commonwealth citizens and those from the Republic of Ireland, as we have discussed. In addition, European Union citizens are allowed to vote in local elections.

As my hon. Friend acknowledged, the amendment would remove all such nationality requirements. Anyone of any nationality would be able to register and to vote in both parliamentary and local elections, provided that they were resident, over 18 and not otherwise disqualified. It would not matter how remote their ties with this country were, or for how long or short a time they intended to stay here. That is neither a sensible nor satisfactory position. I do not think that anyone who has spoken in the debate has put forward the proposition that that is a sensible arrangement for us to consider.

I am bound to point out, as others have, that we are not alone in that view. The Select Committee on Home Affairs considered the issue in its report on electoral law and administration, which was published last year. Its conclusion was both wise and unambiguous:

"We do not think the present voting entitlements for non-UK citizens need extension".

It could not have been clearer. That report was the product of an all-party consensus and it would be folly if the House were to depart from that consensus tonight.

5.15 pm

Mr. Bercow: Unless I have misinterpreted his remarks, the Minister appears to be relatively sympathetic to the view expressed by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) that more information should be provided to electors—especially those who are exercising their right to vote for the first time—about the elections in which they are thinking of voting. Does the Minister believe that, in due course, for the benefit of electors, detailed information should be provided explaining exactly the powers available to the respective bodies to which elections are to be held, so that voters know what are the powers of the European Parliament, the House of Commons, district councils, borough councils, county councils and so on?

Mr. Howarth: The general principle is reasonable. The hon. Gentleman might recall that, immediately prior to the most recent elections to the European Parliament, the Home Office published a leaflet, available in several languages, giving those sorts of facts about the European Parliament. It is important that people have access to such information. As one who stands at the Dispatch Box on a temporary, no-fee transfer, I do not want to commit the Home Office to taking specific action in future—and even though the prospect is tempting, I shall resist doing so. However, the hon. Gentleman's general proposition should always be part of our considerations.

The working party that I chaired, which enjoyed a cross-party consensus and on whose work the Bill is based, bore in mind our responsibility, through legislation and other means, to make it as easy as possible, without compromising the integrity of the ballot, for as many people as possible to vote. Part of that requires people to understand why and for what they are being asked to vote, and the powers of the body involved. Therefore, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's plea to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will not fall on deaf ears.

There are good and historic reasons why Commonwealth and Irish citizens may vote in our elections. The Maastricht treaty, which the House endorsed, gave all European Union citizens reciprocal voting rights in local elections in EU member states. I inadvertently omitted to mention the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), who referred to the voting rights of citizens of the Commonwealth and of the Republic of Ireland. During his speech, it struck me that his most illustrious predecessor is Disraeli, who incorporated in the 1867 Reform Bill the so-called fancy franchises. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman was not suggesting that we are creating the modern equivalent of the fancy franchises, but it is appropriate that a Member representing Beaconsfield should participate in this debate.

There is no reason—good, compelling or otherwise—to extend voting facilities to those who come from countries with which we have no historical ties and who

might have no affinity with Britain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire for giving us the opportunity to debate the subject. However, I hope that, having had our debate, he will feel able to withdraw his amendment, because we do not believe that it would be appropriate to incorporate in the Bill the principle expressed therein.

Mr. Barnes: It is a privilege to have the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), on the Treasury Bench today. When he was at the Home Office, he carried out a great deal of work chairing the working party that helped to develop the Bill and the valuable measures it contains. My hon. Friend has always responded to me courteously and taken on board the various arguments and points that I have advanced.

A valuable feature of my hon. Friend's contribution was that I learned that at least the amendment was technically correct. Someone mentioned that when he saw it initially he thought that I was trying to get rid of enfranchisement for Commonwealth and Irish citizens resident in this country. When it was put to me that the amendment was the means by which I could achieve that objective, I was rather worried that that was the case.

My hon. Friend said that I was not quite correct in some instances about measures to extend the franchise to homeless people and people on remand. However, for homeless people it is just about impossible to become registered, although there are some who have been able to do so. Until the Bill was put before us, it was necessary to have a residence to get on to the electoral register. By definition, that virtually ruled out a homeless person, although there were often ways and means that enabled such people to find their way around the requirement. There was often a difficult set of circumstances and some registration decisions were made by magistrates courts, for example. Those decisions did not have any wider knock-on effect. That being so, the clarity of the Bill is welcome. I used some shorthand when I mentioned these points earlier. As I have introduced Bills on these matters in the past, my hon. Friend will realise that I am involved, to some extent, in these considerations.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench, pointed out that I was alone in presenting the amendments. I was alone in 1988, and for a considerable period thereafter, in propounding the notion of a rolling register. We are now dealing with a Bill that contains proposals for such a register. I might be alone in presenting the idea that lies behind the amendments, but in 10 or 11 years' time others might recognise the wisdom of my arguments.

The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) and the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) stressed points about citizenship. Citizenship is relevant to our citizens who are overseas, and the rights that they are given by the British Government that are designed to protect them in the nations in which they find themselves. Whether those rights should be extended to the franchise is another matter.

The world has changed considerably since some notions were fashioned. We now have a cosmopolitan world in which people move in and out of different areas. It is not always clear to people what their nation is. However, it is clear where they are, and the Government and administration responsible for making decisions that immediately affect their lives at that time can be clearly identified. We should develop electoral registration that is based on those circumstances, while recognising that there is sense in terms of citizenship.

As we are moving towards a rolling register, it would be possible for people to spend a period overseas and, if the Government adopted the principles that I am suggesting, be registered in the other country. As soon as they returned home to the United Kingdom, they would be placed on electoral registers under the procedures that are contained within the Bill. There are alternative principles to that of citizenship, although I accept that there is significance and importance to be attached to it. Much depends on the weight that is put upon these arguments.

Mr. Hogg: Will the hon. Gentleman deal with the following bizarre situation? The citizens of some countries, such as the United States, Australia and, indeed, the UK, can vote for their domestic Parliaments even when they are overseas. If the hon. Gentleman's proposal were accepted, an American citizen would be entitled to vote both in American elections and in elections for the Westminster Parliament. That is not self-evidently sensible.

Mr. Barnes: It is not self-evidently sensible, but if the House adopted the principles with respect to the United Kingdom, we would have good grounds for arguing that America and other nations should operate according to the same principles. Then we would have an arrangement that allowed people to vote where they were at different times of their lives.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman was using the same technique with regard to my contribution as he used in his speech. He posed the problem of people who were just passing through. He was pushing my principle to the nth degree, in order to test it. I grant that any principle pushed to the limit will seem to create peculiar and problematic situations. It is highly unlikely that anyone would pass through just to be registered on an electoral register in order to vote in an election.

The notion that registration could be so temporary as not to matter may be correct, but it should not be allowed to destroy my general argument. There are always exceptions to principles. In general, people who are resident or who can obtain a declaration of local connection should be on registers, but I recognise that there may be some who do not qualify. The case of prisoners, which I raised, may be one of the exceptions. There are qualifications to the general principle, and awkward cases can be discovered, but that should not lead to its destruction.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) pointed out that many citizens of the Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland who are resident in this country have no idea that they are entitled to vote. I have been in touch with constituents from the Commonwealth who have been in the country for 20 years and are not on the electoral register. If my proposal were adopted, it would make it more easily understood that people could register once they were UK residents. That would apply to Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens, as well as to others.

[Mr. Barnes]

It is obvious that I am a lone voice pursuing the argument. I believe that everything that I have said is correct and needs to be pushed, even I failed to put evidence about it to the Home Affairs Committee during its investigations, although I put many other points, which will be covered later.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

5.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: I beg to move amendment No. 69, in page 1, line 19, leave out "18" and insert "16".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 70, in page 2, line 8, leave out "18" and insert "16".

No. 71, in clause 6, page 8, line 22, leave out "18" and insert "16".

No. 83, in schedule 2, page 28, line 5, leave out "18" and insert "16".

Mr. Hughes: The amendment is important and would change the voting age from 18 to 16, and alter the substantive Act—currently the Representation of the People Act 1983—to effect that.

I was between 18 and 21 when the law that reduced the voting age from 21 to 18 was passed in 1969. I became entitled to vote on 1 January 1970, and it was lucky that a general election took place in that year, when I could exercise my right to vote.

Mr. Bercow: Where?

Mr. Hughes: In Tanygrisiau in Meirionnydd. However, that is not terribly relevant to the debate. I remember the occasion well. We had moved away by then, but my dad and I made the long journey back and ensured that we voted.

Having the right to vote was important to me. *[Interruption.]* How did I vote? I voted Liberal. I do not believe that more of my biography is required for the purpose of the argument. However, it shows a consistency that is greater than that displayed by some other hon. Members in Committee. One last bit of biography: in those days, we did not win the seats in which I voted, but now we often do. That is progress.

Reconsideration of whether 18 is the right age for people to be entitled to vote has been undertaken on several occasions. In January 1985—International Youth Year—my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) introduced the Youth Charter Bill under the ten-minute rule. One of its provisions was the reduction of the voting age to 16 and a reduction of the age for eligibility to stand for election to 18. Although the Bill did not make progress because it fell under the usual ten-minute rule procedure, it was quite widely supported.

Since then, the proposal to reduce the voting age to 16 has appeared on the Order Paper several times. It was tabled as an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill in 1985; it was a provision in private Members' Bills in 1991, 1992 and earlier this year. It has also appeared in several general election manifestos. The policy was included in our 1992 general election manifesto and the Scottish National party included it in its 1997 manifesto. When the Liberal Democrats were created, we adopted that policy. It has remained our policy ever since.

I was a relatively belated convert to reducing the voting age to 16. I got into trouble with some of my colleagues and some people outside the House when, a few years ago, I argued for the lowering not only of the age of consent but the age of majority to 17. There is a need to simplify the law on when people become entitled to specific rights. However, for several reasons, I have been persuaded that, just as a majority believes that the right age of homosexual consent should be 16 to bring it into line with the age of heterosexual consent, there is a growing body of opinion in favour of reducing the voting age to 16.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: Of course I will give way to my erstwhile opponent.

Mr. Heald: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the considerations that apply to the age at which people have sexual relations are similar to those that apply to the age at which people can vote? They are rather different activities.

Mr. Hughes: We could discuss for how long people think before doing each and the pre-planning involved; I shall have to be careful not to get into linguistic difficulties as I nearly said "foreplanning". Of course those activities are different, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman will travel this road with me. In this country an enormous number of entitlements are given at 16 and some, although not many, are given at 17. Another batch is given at 18 and some are given at 21. I say to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, who has almost silently substituted for the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), that I hope that the Home Office will consider the legislation as a whole and review the age of majority—or the age at which people gain rights—because it is muddled.

That brings us back to the point that I made in response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow): if the people of this country are to learn about their rights, it is better for the legislation to be simple and for there to be as few ages of entitlement as possible, not as many as there are at present. The law changes every year in this respect, but the most recent briefing I have is last year's from the Children's Legal Centre, based at Essex university.

Mr. Bercow: It is a great university.

Mr. Hughes: Indeed it is. The briefing sets out 33 different entitlements or types of entitlement given at 16, eight entitlements or types of entitlement given at 17, and 34 entitlements or types of entitlement given at 18. To deal with the intervention of the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), I shall say in a

moment why my colleagues and I believe that, on balance, it is right to consider changing the voting age to 16, although I should like that to happen as part of a wider consideration of the age of entitlement for young people. I hope that the Government have that on their agenda, too.

Mr. Heald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Is he saying that the age of majority should be 16 for most purposes? Some of us might feel that, because of certain aspects of legal responsibility concerning majority, 18 may be a better age. I should be grateful for his thoughts on that.

Mr. Hughes: It is proper for the Committee to consider exactly such issues and there is no theology or absolutism involved here. Other countries have different views: some use a voting age that is under 18, although the majority use 18, and I understand that it is above 18 in some countries. We should have this debate periodically.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Hughes: I shall give way in a moment, but before I do so I shall list the entitlements currently given at 16 to provide the backdrop for my comments. People can leave school or stay in full-time education, which is free; they can work full-time, but not in betting shops or bars, which are exceptions; they can receive a national insurance number; they can receive income support; and they must pay prescription charges unless they are in an exempt category.

The list provided by the Children's Legal Centre carries a slightly odd description, saying:

"You can probably leave home without the consent of your parents or anyone else with parental responsibility."

I think that 16-year-olds "probably" can leave home and that word is probably otiose. They can also enter into a contract for housing—we all have constituents who are tenants from the age of 16 onwards—and are entitled to be housed on their own if they come within one of the priority categories outlined in the Housing Act 1985. Girls aged 16 can consent to heterosexual intercourse and 16-year-olds can marry, although that requires parental consent.

Furthermore, 16-year-olds can join trade unions; consent to surgical, medical or dental treatment; agree to donate organs, which was discussed yesterday in Westminster Hall; and agree to give blood. They can make the most far-reaching decisions about their medical treatment, and they are entitled to have access to their records. They can apply for a passport and get legal aid and assistance, and they have a right to an offer of training under the Government's training schemes.

Under criminal law, 16-year-olds move into a new category in respect of what they can be convicted of and the sentences that they can receive. Importantly, they can sign up for the armed services and serve our country—there is a debate about the international conventions and where they can serve. They can hold a driving licence for certain purposes, although not yet to drive a motor car on the roads. They can buy cigarettes and tobacco, and have beer, cider or perry with a meal in a restaurant. They can buy liqueur chocolates—not a law I knew about.

Mr. Bercow: That is useful at Christmas.

Mr. Hughes: That is true—and a reminder to 16-year-olds to do their Christmas shopping. They can buy fireworks, they have to pay full fare on trains, and they can buy premium bonds; they may take part in public performances without a local authority licence, become a street trader, sell scrap metal, be used by another person in order to beg in the street, act as a pilot in command of a glider, purchase a knife, blade, razor or axe, and, lastly and somewhat bizarrely, they are allowed to enter or live in a brothel.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): That is a relief.

Mr. Hughes: You may look perturbed, Mr. Winterton, but the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) said that that is a relief. The opportunity for biographical descriptions may come to him at any moment in a Committee, and we look forward to what may be sufficiently later in his life for it not to cause him any trouble now.

It seems to me that the law would benefit from a bit of revision in this area. On occasions we may not have realised the consequences of the legislation that we have introduced. Whether we like it or not, many rights come at 16, and I shall explain why I think that 16-year-olds should be given one of the most important rights.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is making a scintillating speech. Knowing him, I feel sure that the amendment is motivated by high principle and not by any grubby popularism. Given that he is a fervent admirer of the European Union, can he tell the Committee in which member state, if any, people are entitled to vote at the age of 16?

Hon. Members: Norway!

Mr. Hughes: As far as I know, the answer is none—not even in Norway, unless Norway legislated yesterday. My speech has not been heard there—I shall remember to take it to the folketing when I next visit.

This country was one of the first to allow people to vote at 18. We do not necessarily have to wait for others to do something, or to be the last to do it. An increasing number of other countries allow voting at 16, although they are not European Union countries.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): This is not intended as a light-hearted point, but the hon. Gentleman is making an interesting argument for the right to vote at 16 and I wondered whether he recalls the 1960s song "Eve of Destruction" by Barry Maguire, which came out during the Vietnam war and contained the line:

"Young enough to fight, but not for voting".

Mr. Hughes: There is the rub. Some very important rights come at the age of 16: 16-year-olds can marry, have children, fight, work and pay taxes. They are old enough to kill and to pay tax. Colleagues may anticipate my next point, because the argument about no taxation without representation is the obvious consequence of that.

5.45 pm

Despite the Government's intention to retain them in education or training, many young people want to go out and work. I think that when young people are faced with choices between education and work, and between work

[Mr. Hughes]

and joining the armed services, they should be allowed to influence the policies that determine those choices and affect their citizenship.

There is another supremely important point, as well as the taxation and representation point. If we as a Parliament are involved in decisions to commit our armed services to going to war—although that may not require parliamentary approval—there is a strong case for allowing those whom we are committing a say in those decisions.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman says that he wants to "clean up" the legislation. People are allowed to view R-rated films at the age of 18; does the hon. Gentleman wish to lower that to 16? As for no taxation without representation—or no taxation without the ability to vote—a seven-year-old buying sweets will pay value added tax. Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that the payment of tax by seven-year-olds should therefore be the rule?

Mr. Hughes: Everything that is sold is subject to indirect tax.

Mr. Evans: It is still tax.

Mr. Hughes: It is, but it is not a personal tax in the sense in which income tax is a personal tax.

I have not given much thought to the question of films, but in a way the hon. Gentleman has made my point for me. There is a range of legislation relating to the age of consent which the Home Office should consider.

Attitudes change; society changes. In earlier centuries, people—monarchs as well as subjects—married at 11, 12 or 13 and had children. That was considered entirely legitimate and normal. Things have moved on, however: subjects have become citizens, and we have more democracy. We should continually re-examine issues such as this. Liberal Democrats, with the support of hon. Members on both sides of the House, have concluded that it is time for us to think of making progress.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I will give way once more; then I want to make some final substantive points.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman said that he did not think taxation on expenditure was in the same category as personal taxation. If someone is fortunate enough to be left money by a grandfather at the age of seven and it is put in trust, it will be liable to tax. The person concerned will be directly affected by that tax in exactly the same way as someone over the age of 18 but will have no voting rights. I do not think the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that voting rights should be extended to people of that age.

Mr. Hughes: No, I am not, but a number of serious issues are involved. Matters that the House has considered before should be put on the agenda again. The Government are taking a sensible and positive attitude; I compliment them on that, and hope that the Committee will join me, but there are wider issues to be considered.

In my constituency, we are currently trying to involve the community in part of Rotherhithe in deciding the location of new play and sports facilities for young people. There is considerable local debate about whether voting rights should be given to those over 18, those who are householders or those who are over 11—who will be using the football pitch and the play areas. There are similar issues involving communities elsewhere in the country.

Here, we are discussing the national Parliament, local government, Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the European Parliament. I believe that we should lower the voting age from 18 to 16, not lightly, ill advisedly or wantonly—to use a phrase from elsewhere—but because we feel that the time has come to do so. If the Minister says that the Government are willing to put the issue on the agenda even more formally, that will be a step forward.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I will give way one more time; then I really must finished my speech.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman seems to consider the fact that many 16-year-olds work and pay taxes to be a good reason for giving them the vote. Does he accept the logical corollary, which is that as an increasing proportion of 16-year-olds are not in work but are in full-time education or training, the strength of his argument correspondingly decreases?

Mr. Hughes: No, I do not accept that. This is a topical time to raise that point. The hon. Gentleman may be aware that one of the issues that was important for us at the election was a commitment against tuition fees. That is a huge issue among the student community. It is controversial in Scotland, where it is being debated at the moment. Young people, whether in work or education, are directly affected by our decisions. For those in education, policies on who should pay for education, whether they have grants or loans, whether the money is repayable, whether there is a graduate tax and whether there are tuition fees are all important matters. Those young people do not pay tax in the same way as those who are in work, although they are liable—increasing numbers of students do weekend or holiday jobs to pull in the money to keep them through their time as students—but that does not mean that they are less likely to be interested in and affected by decisions of Parliament.

I have given some important reasons, but the key reason why the Government should consider my proposition is that we are trying to engage young people in the political process. The Government have said that they want to do that. The people of this country are apathetic when it comes to voting. Young people vote less than any other category; older people vote more. Many young people say that they do not think that we represent them. The hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) is currently the youngest Member of Parliament.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): No; it is my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie).

Mr. Hughes: I beg the hon. Lady's pardon and that of the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), who is the

youngest Member of Parliament. The hon. Lady is the youngest woman. They have on their shoulders the responsibility of trying to represent all those younger than themselves—a responsibility that various Liberal Democrats have had before, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) and David Steel. Young people ask them to put their views because they are the youngest people in Parliament. The youngest ever Member of Parliament was 21. I know from my constituency experience that lots of young people feel that we do not represent them. We do not sound like them or look like them. When they start being interested when they do civics, politics, social studies or citizenship at school, they cannot engage.

On new year's eve last year, Paul Waugh wrote an interesting and informed piece in *The Independent* entitled "Vote at 16 to be considered by ministers". He started:

"Radical proposals to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 are to be considered by the Government in a fresh attempt to keep politicians in touch with the youth of the day.

Under plans to be put before ministers next year"—

which, for another two weeks, is this year—

"a Representation of Young People Bill would allow the UK's 1.5 million 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in general and local elections."

He went on to say:

"The cross-party move follows a new study that shows teenagers are much more interested in politics than commonly assumed, even though many are disillusioned with the main parties."

On an important party political issue, the article carries on:

"Labour backers of the idea believe it could restore much-needed idealism to the Government's battered image and confirm Tony Blair's reputation as a ground-breaking premier."

Further on, the article says:

"A Home Office working party on electoral law will be presented with the proposals next summer"—

that is this summer—

"once it has concluded its current consultation on electronic voting and polling stations in supermarkets."

It continues:

"Although Labour stands most to gain from an expanded youth vote"—

my colleagues and I disagree with that, but it is what the article says—

"the Tories and Liberal Democrats believe under-18s could reap them electoral dividends.

Policies such as the lower minimum wage rate and benefit restrictions for the under-18s . . . could lead to a backlash against Labour, they say."

My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) is quoted as saying:

"The simple fact is that people under 18 feel that they are prejudiced against in grounds of age. They pay tax, can have sex and die for their country, but they can't vote."

I should be interested to hear from the Minister whether the issue is still on the Government's agenda, whether a Home Office working party will be presented with a proposal, as the article said, and whether, even if the Government cannot agree to it today, they are willing to put it on the agenda for early all-party consideration with the support of Ministers and civil servants.

We strongly support the proposal. Young people would respond positively. It would deal with apathy in this country and would engage many people who feel alienated. We hope that the Committee thinks that it is a good idea, that the Government will give a warm response and that it will be supported by all parties.

Ms Ward: I agree with a lot of what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has said. He was right to refer to the anomalies of young people gaining different rights at different ages. I have always thought that it was a strange way to bring children and young people into the world of adulthood. There should be one point at which we tell a young person, "You are now an adult. You take hold of your responsibility." Young people are expected to take responsibility at 16, then again at 18, then again at 21, rather than at one common age. I have always believed that the common age should be 16. That view is supported by the British Youth Council and, as the hon. Gentleman said, by many others, including Members of Parliament and other youth organisations. The issue has been raised in the House before and I have great sympathy with the arguments.

I have always found it strange that people are old enough at 16 to get married with their parents' consent, but not to vote. They are old enough to pay their taxes if they work and to contribute to society in a significant and adult way, but they are not old enough to vote for the politicians who determine what happens to those taxes and what they pay for.

Perhaps one of the most significant issues is the right to join the armed forces and fight for the country. A couple of months ago, I visited the Royal Marines training centre at Lymston and talked to 17-year-old men who will represent this country admirably. We will put our faith in those young men and they will go abroad to represent us and serve the country, but they cannot vote for the politicians who can put them in the firing line. It is a great sorrow for this country that we have been unable to make progress on that issue.

Young people of 16 can buy cigarettes and lottery tickets, but have to wait until they are 18 to buy alcohol. I am sure that many hon. Members would be concerned about the prospect of 16 or 17-year-olds buying alcohol, but we have to set that against the current legislation, which enables them to buy cigarettes and lottery tickets. Those of us who occasionally like a drop of alcohol but do not particularly like cigarettes might say that cigarettes are far more harmful to health than alcohol. The House should address that important issue. Young people of 16 who leave school are expected to pay full prescription charges. They are expected to pay the full price for entry to public services and must pay full fare on public transport. It is a strange way to run our country and engage young people.

6 pm

Mr. Heald: I do not know what it is like in the hon. Lady's part of Hertfordshire because the roads are so bad that it is difficult to get there. However, in the schools that she visits, does she find that there is any real demand for voting at 16? In the schools that I have visited—I recently held a youth surgery in Royston as part of the celebration of the convention on the rights of the child—

[Mr. Heald]

there was no great demand for votes at 16. The young people were looking forward to voting at 18, but nobody said that that was too old.

Ms Ward: Like the hon. Gentleman, I held a young persons' surgery in a local school and we discussed this issue. There was a mix of views. I have spoken to many young people in schools and youth organisations, and there has been a mix of views. I believe that more young people would like the right to vote at 16 mainly because they do not understand why they attain rights at different ages. They would like a simpler system so that they can vote, pay taxes and have all the other rights that have been mentioned at one particular age.

There is more to the issue, and it involves engaging young people in politics. I am sure that many hon. Members have had discussions with sixth formers in schools in their constituencies, and have brought young people to the House of Commons. They know that, among those who study citizenship issues or politics, there is a desire to learn more. Once young people are excited about an issue, there should be an opportunity for them to engage in it in more depth.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Lady has been a happy Member of this House for two and a half years, in which time she will have received many letters. How many has she received on this subject?

Ms Ward: I should be most surprised if that were thought to be the only yardstick. I have discussed this issue with a number of other people and with youth organisations. We must remember that it is not just about the number of letters that we receive. Letters often come as a result of a debate or an issue being raised. The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members will doubtless hear more about the matter as a result of this debate.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I am grateful to my young colleague—*[Interruption.]* I have to concede the point.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) talked about the number of letters being a yardstick. I was a Member of the House when the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1969, and I did not receive a single letter on the subject. I doubt whether any hon. Member received many, if any, letters on the subject. Despite that, even Conservative Members would not argue that the voting age should be 21.

Ms Ward: I thank my older colleague and friend. I agree that, sometimes, issues are discussed and agreed in the House and that, as time moves on, there is no great desire for change. That is part of the issue. Time moves on and it is important that we look to change the current system.

Mr. Bercow: The fact that the hon. Lady has discussed this issue with youth organisations is a necessary but not sufficient condition for her to make her case. Can she tell the Committee what study she has made of the continental experience? Also, in view of her preference for one age of majority, has she discussed with road safety organisations the implications of issuing a full driving licence at 16?

Ms Ward: I shall come to driving a little later. The hon. Gentleman talks about youth organisations and youth rights on the continent. I know that he shows a keen interest in Europe and matters European, although perhaps from an angle different from mine. I am aware of no country with a voting age of 16, but in many European countries there is, at the very least, a common age at which most rights are attained. I believe that most rights should be attained at one age and my preference is for that to be 16.

In addition to the rights attained at 16 and 18, we also attain rights at other ages. At 21, one can stand for Parliament or for a council and at 25, one is entitled to additional income through the social security benefit system. It is wrong to have different ages for different rights. Surely if one is entitled to vote for a Member of Parliament or a member of a local authority, one should also be entitled to stand as a representative. At an appropriate time, I shall want to see a change in the legislation on that.

We must look carefully at the amendment. I hope that I have made it clear that I am a keen supporter of the issue, but, with due respect to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, this is not really the way to seek change. There must be a broader debate on the issue of rights for young people and the age at which they are attained. I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman and he seemed to agree with that point.

Mr. Heald: Are not the considerations different for different things? The age at which somebody might drive safely on the roads might well be different from the age at which he or she holds a sensible view on issues to do with society. There may be different ages for different things. Does the hon. Lady not think that to have one age for sexual relations, voting and so on is rather foolish and that each of those issues should be considered on their merits, as they are now?

Ms Ward: I believe that there are genuine reasons for having different ages for some aspects of legal rights. For example, 10 is an important age in criminal law and children are considered differently at various ages before the courts. That is right for the criminal law. However, I do not believe that it is right to have different ages for voting, standing as a Member of Parliament, serving in the armed forces, buying lottery tickets, smoking or having sexual relations, whether those be heterosexual or homosexual.

Mr. Heald: Is it not inconsistent that many Liberal Democrats argue that we should sign up to the European convention on human rights as it applies to the age at which people can join the armed forces, which is 18, while arguing that the voting age should be reduced to 16? Where is the sense in that?

Ms Ward: As I hope the hon. Gentleman is aware, I am not a Liberal Democrat and it is not for me to answer that point. I am sure, however, that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will have the opportunity to do so.

I should not like to sign up to any clauses proposing to stop young men serving in the armed forces from the age of 16. They make a valuable and admirable contribution to the United Kingdom.

Mr. Simon Hughes: May I tell the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) that I very much support people being allowed to join the armed forces at 16 and that, on the wider point, there is not much between us. As I told the Minister, the time has come for the Government to examine the issue in the round. It is difficult to argue that one should not have civic responsibilities—such as the duty to vote and to perform jury service—at 16, whereas the state allows one to assume family and parental responsibility at 16. I am not sure that the right and duty to vote require more care, consideration and attention than the decision to have children.

Ms Ward: Unfortunately, as we know from recent cases—there have been tragic cases in which children bear or father children—the right to have children is a much more biological issue. Although we can legislate on such issues, it is much more difficult to enforce that legislation.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said that there should be a broader review of age issues, and I certainly agree with him. However, that is precisely why we should not pass amendment No. 69.

As I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree, various anomalies already exist. If amendment No. 69 were to be passed and implemented, we would be creating another anomaly that is as great as, if not greater than, current ones. Although young people would be entitled to vote at 16, they would not attain other rights. They would not be entitled to stand for Parliament until they were 21—thereby creating an even worse, five-year gap between the ages at which they could vote and stand for Parliament.

Mr. Hughes: Although I understand the hon. Lady's point, sometimes—as the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) said in the previous debate—one simply has to flag up a point and put down a marker. I have been an hon. Member somewhat longer than the hon. Lady, and my experience has been that one must push the Government to make them move. My hon. Friends and I intend to press the amendment to a vote to make the point that people feel strongly about the issue and to help bring forward the day when the Government act, rather than simply leave the matter to be resolved in the indefinite future.

Ms Ward: The hon. Gentleman has a great interest in young people, and I hope that, if he has a real regard for their views on the matter, he will not press the amendment. If he does so, the Government, using their large majority, will defeat it. Consequently, rather than leaving the door slightly ajar so that hon. Members, organisations and the Government can re-examine the issue, the House will deliver a firm no, which might be misunderstood by young people. That is not how we should proceed.

If the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey were to press the amendment, he could damage the case for voting at 16. As hon. Members know, I am a strong supporter of reducing the age of majority to 16 and of allowing young people to vote at 16. However, I do not believe that amendment No. 69 is the way to achieve those goals.

We must consider the issue much more widely. Now that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey has placed the issue on the House's agenda—and, I hope, on the broader political agenda—we should make progress much more consensually to ensure that we have greater knowledge and understanding of the issues and are able to iron out some of the issues raised by Conservative Members. If the amendment were passed, many more issues would doubtless be raised in another place.

Mr. Bercow: I have been listening intently to the hon. Lady's speech and found it most intriguing, but I find her latest comments quite extraordinary. It is not for me to defend the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, but it is extraordinary for the hon. Lady, who is vigorously articulating the case for wider democracy, suddenly to denounce the hon. Gentleman for retarding—should he press his amendment to a vote—the cause of allowing people to vote at 16.

6.15 pm

Ms Ward: The hon. Gentleman misses the point. We have to consider the issue more deeply and not in isolation. We should not change one part of one Bill, to give 16-year-olds the right to vote, as that would create other anomalies. We should examine the broader issue of young people attaining rights and the age at which those rights should be conferred. I would certainly support such an approach.

Changing one small—but important—Bill is not the right way to address the issue, as that would not deal with all the anomalies. I should prefer a Government Bill or a private Member's Bill to seek to change the age of majority, as the passage of such a Bill would have a ripple effect, changing all legislation affecting young people.

Mr. Hughes: I am not sure that the hon. Lady had planned on making that argument. However, as she has, she will have great difficulty in supporting the Government's Bill on equalising the age of consent. That legislation deals with precisely the same principles as those in this Bill: the age at which people gain rights. It would be very difficult for her to support that legislation, but not to vote with us today.

Ms Ward: I shall have no difficulty in doing just that. The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill will address an issue of equality and end a very clear anomaly by ensuring that the age of consent is equalised between heterosexuals and homosexuals. That Bill will end an anomaly without consequently affecting other legislation applying to 16-year-olds. Subsequently, the House should consider a more comprehensive package on changing legislation on young people.

As I said, by pressing the amendment, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey might damage the argument. The damage would not be to the principle that people should be able to vote at 16, but young people might start to feel that change is unlikely. Change is possible, but only if we work on the broader issues and discuss them more widely.

[Ms Ward]

I urge the hon. Member not to press the matter, but to seek conciliation and consultation with other hon. Members and with various organisations. Perhaps we shall even be able to enlist the support of some Conservative Members.

Mr. Evans: In the numerous and lengthy discussions on the issue that the hon. Lady has had with young people—she has received no mail on the issue—has she told them, "I want the voting age to be lowered to 16, which is why I shall vote against it at the first opportunity to do so in the House?"

Ms Ward: The hon. Gentleman made that point; I did not.

Mr. Bercow: What is the answer?

Ms Ward: I shall explain to young people that, at some point, we should introduce legislation—which may have the support even of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and other Conservative Members—that makes changes to young people's rights and does not seek, in isolation, to make only one change that will create other anomalies.

Mr. Bercow: Can we clarify the position for 16-year-olds who read the broadsheet or tabloid newspapers tomorrow and reflect on the hon. Lady's sage words? Do I understand her aright when I say that, by pressing the amendment to allow people to vote at 16, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey is an inveterate opponent of equality, whereas the hon. Lady, who will go eagerly into the Lobby with the approval of the Patronage Secretary to vote against the amendment, is an enthusiastic champion of that equality?

Ms Ward: As usual, the hon. Gentleman seeks to make mischief and he is not going to make mischief with me.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey believes strongly and wholeheartedly in the rights of young people—I do not doubt that for a moment. I want to be helpful. We may have more success if the matter is given more thought and there is more understanding of it among a broader section of the community and of the House than if it is pushed to a vote tonight.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Even if one accepts the hon. Lady's argument that we should consider all the issues that surround the age of majority together—I do not—does she agree that it would be helpful if there were a strong vote in favour tonight, in that it would guide the Government in the right direction?

Ms Ward: The hon. Lady knows well that it is also important for the issues to be raised in the House. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and others have raised some important points. It would be useful if we could discuss the issue at a more appropriate time, perhaps with better legislation, to ensure that the changes that I am sure we all want can take place across the board.

Young people need to be engaged in, and excited by, politics and the issues that they face every day, and about who makes decisions for them. I certainly hope that the generation that is going through our schools will be the beneficiaries of the Government's changes in the national curriculum, which will result in more emphasis being put on citizenship studies. Hopefully, more young people will be interested in playing their part as citizens and being engaged in politics and the issues surrounding political life, as well as the most important matters that determine how they live their lives.

I have made my views clear. I hope that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will not push the amendment to a vote. I trust that the House will discuss the issue at some other time, as a Bill or an amendment to a Bill that would change all legislation affecting young people and change the age of majority to 16 would give young people the right that they richly deserve.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): It is a pleasure to be in a Committee with you in the Chair, Mr. Winterton.

I listened to, and enjoyed, the contribution of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). The House is at its best when it debates first principles. It gives people a clear view of the constitution.

This has been a century of change. There have been many changes in the electorate under Liberal, Labour and, indeed, Conservative Governments. In 1929, the first election in which both men and women voted on an equal basis took place. That was a milestone and it was introduced, with reservations, by Stanley Baldwin's Government and the Conservative party. By and large, it has stood the test of time.

Mr. Heald: Does my hon. Friend agree that Stanley Baldwin's excellent initiative was one reason why the Conservatives won the Bermondsey seat in 1931?

Mr. Syms: I do not think that we would have won it in 1929. If we won it in 1931, a few other factors probably helped.

Mr. Simon Hughes: For the record, my researches revealed that that election was won for two reasons. The candidate was relatively wealthy and dispensed some of her wealth, and certainly the things that she acquired with it, to the electorate in ways that had not been known before, and have not been known since.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) said that he was a Member of this House when it reduced the voting age to 18. The 1969 by-election in Bridgwater was the first occasion on which 18-year-olds could vote and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) was the first beneficiary of such votes. However, I am not persuaded about the argument for voting at 16. I would not say that I have ruled it out for ever, but it needs consideration. At this point, I would not vote for it. I and those of my colleagues who are at present on the Conservative Benches are perhaps the modernising wing of the Conservative party and I am sure that we would like to give the matter further consideration. However, 18 is probably the best age, as is reflected throughout the European Union.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey read out a long list of responsibilities that one has at 16. It is not good to use one argument to justify that age for all the issues. It cuts both ways. Sixteen might be a sensible age of majority for one issue, but it might not be a sensible age for others. That might result in people arguing that the age should be pushed up for a range of other matters. Basically, 18 is a good age. Age limits vary because the House has judged on a number of occasions and in a number of Committees that different age limits are sensible, particularly with regard to the benefits system.

If one says, "That is the age of majority," and everything follows on from it, it will produce as many anomalies and concerns as the present system. We have heard the argument about people driving at 16. We all know that there are problems with young drivers—they tend to have more accidents. I am not convinced that 16 is the right age—certainly not yet. I support the argument for 18. That age of majority has worked well since the 1970 general election, when it was first generally introduced.

Many countries have a variable age of majority. In this country, one can vote at 18, but one has to be 21 to stand for Parliament. In the United States, one can vote at 18 but cannot stand for some forms of public office until one is much older. I cannot remember whether one has to be 30 or 32 to stand for the Senate—there certainly is an age limit. There is also an age limit for standing for President. That was written into the constitution because it was felt that standing for public office was important.

I am never persuaded by the argument about taxation without representation—the fetish that, because people pay taxes, they should have more of a say in the affairs of our nation. What about people who do not pay tax? Are they any less worthy? Are their views and values and their contribution to society worth less? I do not believe that to be the case. We heard about taxation on inheritance, value added tax and the tax on sweets. One cannot establish exactly when someone has started to pay tax and so should be able to vote. Frankly, the moment that someone is born, the state will take something off them. Therefore, I am not oversold on the tax link.

There is no great public demand for reducing the age of majority to 16. I have received no letters on the subject. Like most hon. Members, I have spoken in schools. Young people ask about many things, but I have not got the impression that they want the voting age to be reduced from 18 to 16.

6.30 pm

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend points out, quite rightly, that there is no demonstrable demand for such a lowering of the voting age. Is he aware that one of the great problems facing democracy in the United Kingdom is getting those in the 18 to 30 age group to vote, let alone those who are between 16 and 18?

Mr. Syms: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I have always felt that our education system does not do enough to educate people about their rights and responsibilities, the British constitution and the importance of participating in democratic elections. That is a different issue from lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, but we could do much more to get young people interested.

Of course, youngsters have other interests. As people get older, they tend to participate more in the electoral process. We have to hope that some of the young people who abstain today vote tomorrow. All political parties should be concerned about this. Public participation is very important for the democratic legitimacy of this House and the whole body politic.

Apart from education, perhaps political parties should try to tune in a bit more to young people and make them more interested and excited. The hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) made that point. I have no doubt that, over the next 18 months, all the political parties will be trying to tune in to young voters and their interests.

Jackie Ballard: Drop out.

Mr. Syms: Not drop out, but tune in.

I am not persuaded by the amendment. I have not totally closed my mind to it; this has been an interesting debate, and I would like to reflect further on the views expressed. If there is a Division on the amendment, I will not be in the same Lobby as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, in spite of his wonderful contribution. However, I will reflect on what he has said, and perhaps I will change my view. I do not know.

Ms Ward: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as he has not closed his mind to the issue, he would feel uncomfortable at being forced to make a decision here tonight? Surely it would be better if the issue were brought back another time.

Mr. Syms: I think that the hon. Lady makes that point more for her defence than for mine.

I will reflect on the issue, and ask my constituents and the classes that I address what they think. It has not been debated much in the newspapers—it is not a great popular topic—but perhaps after this debate tonight, *The Sun* and other newspapers will have an opinion, and we will start to read more about it.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend must be as open-minded a Conservative Member of the House as I know.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The only one.

Mr. Bercow: There are many open-minded Conservative Members. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) agree that if he accepted the inviting logic of the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward), that would probably entail him in arguing for the abolition of most, if not all, votes in this House on the grounds that there were very few issues upon which he would not entertain the possibility, in the long career ahead of him, of changing his opinion?

Mr. Syms: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are here to vote and to make decisions. I would not criticise any hon. Member for pressing the amendment to a Division because that is their perfect right, but then they have to accept the consequences of that vote. This may not be the right time to vote; the Committee may not be persuaded to support amendment No. 69. The hon. Member for Watford may be right, and the hon. Member

[Mr. Syms]

for Southwark, North and Bermondsey may have wasted an opportunity. Nevertheless, he has a perfect right to press the amendment to a Division, and the fact that the issue is voted on will no doubt be in reported in *Liberal Democrat News* and in the popular press, and may even help persuade people of his argument.

I do not intend to prolong the proceedings. This is a good debate, and I look forward to hearing more of it.

Mr. Winnick: I shall be brief. I am not in the same age group as my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward). However, as Bridgwater was mentioned, I remember that, some time before the by-election in 1969, I went into a bank in Somerset. Identification was required, and I gave my occupation. I remember the clerk behind the counter saying, "Surely you're too young to be a Member of Parliament." Years have passed, and I am in a different age group, but I remember those words.

This topic should certainly be discussed. I do not in any way criticise the Liberal Democrat party for tabling the amendment. They will undoubtedly put it in *Focus*, in my constituency as well as others, and show how we voted. We shall have to bear up to the consequences and see what can be done.

This is an important topic. I am reminded, as I said in my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Watford, that there was opposition to lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. I must be quite honest—not having checked *Hansard*, I am not sure whether the Conservatives opposed it, but there were certainly Conservative Members who opposed the change. It was argued that 21 was young enough to vote and that it would be unfortunate and irresponsible to allow the vote to people who did not have much experience of adult life. Those arguments should certainly have been heard, although I am glad that they were rejected. Ultimately, the decision was taken to lower the voting age to 18. As I said earlier, no one, including the strongest opponents of lowering the age further, would now argue that the voting age should be increased to 21 again.

I am not certain about allowing voting at 16; I have received no letters on the subject. However, I agree that we should keep an open mind. In fact, mine is not so open on this subject—I am more inclined to lower the age to 16. There are strong arguments for doing so—I shall not repeat them because of lack of time and because they have already been made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). They are valid arguments, which the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), will have to address seriously.

I am concerned about the alienation of young people. Only this week, an opinion poll showed young people's lack of interest in politics. That is a matter of serious concern. It is not the end of democracy; it does not mean that such people will not take a greater interest in politics when they get older, and decide to vote. The fact that there is a gap between older people and youngsters under 21, some of whom are indifferent to politics for all kinds of reasons, is serious. It cannot simply be dismissed out of hand, because the future of our democracy depends on future generations. It means that any democratic society must involve the interests and participation of the majority when it comes to voting.

Mr. Bercow: The widespread apathy and even hostility towards the political process is a legitimate preoccupation for all hon. Members. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is conceivable that people are antipathetic to the political process when they are very young not because they are denied the right to vote but because more and more decisions that affect the totality of the people of this country are taken outside the United Kingdom by institutions that are not accountable to the United Kingdom?

Mr. Winnick: Never let it be said that any Conservative Member loses an opportunity of taking an anti-European stand. I do not want to try your patience, Mr. Winterton, but, as someone who has for many years been something of a Eurosceptic in my party, I shall say only that Conservative xenophobia makes me more inclined to take the European viewpoint.

I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) that young people's apathy and indifference is certainly not because they lack the right to vote. Even the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and his colleagues would not wish to give the impression that large numbers of 16 and 17-year-olds are ready to demonstrate at any opportunity, rather like the suffragettes of old, for the right to vote. That would be a misunderstanding and an exaggeration, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman who moved the amendment would not suggest that it was not but, if we conclude that there is a case for lowering the voting age, as we did in 1969, we should seriously consider it.

No words of mine or of my hon. Friend the Member for Watford will dissuade those who want to press the amendment to a Division from doing so. Of course they want to have a Division. They have made their point and they will test it in the Committee. I will not vote with the Liberal Democrats on this. There are occasions, as the Whips know, when I abstain or vote against the Government, but I do so rarely. Liberal Democrat Members would do the same if they formed a Government.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will not be dismissive—I am sure that he will not—of the amendment that has been moved tonight. There is a strongly held view that a lower voting age would be valid. I doubt that this point will be accepted, but it would be better if there were cross-party support for such a move and more consultation between the parties. That is always better. If the Government of the day want to take a decision on constitutional matters, they can do so of course, but it is far better to achieve cross-party support on matters of voting, qualifications and so on. A unanimous House of Commons has greater credibility on these matters.

The Liberal Democrats will lose the Division, but I hope that further consideration will be given to the matter by the Government, the parliamentary Labour party and the Labour movement, as well as perhaps the Conservative party, following what the hon. Member for Poole said. We should not have a closed mind. It is an important subject. It is worthy of debate and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr. Maclennan: I share with the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) memories of the passage of the Bill that reduced the voting age to 18. In the context of the extremely interesting debate tonight, it is worth recalling two or three historical incidents which have some lessons for us today.

The then Labour Government did not choose to wrap up the question of the voting age with that of the age of majority. Contrary to the view expressed by the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward), the then Labour Government set up a Committee on the age of majority chaired by Mr. Justice Latey. I had the honour to be invited to serve on that Committee. Its remit covered civil rights, but not civic duties or rights such as voting. It reported in favour of reducing the age of majority from 21 to 18. It covered a large range of matters, including the right to marry without parental consent, which was a matter of some controversy at that time.

The Latey committee recognised that the process of maturation was not the same for all people; some people became older more quickly than others. For some, it was possible that as legislators we should at least have in mind the importance of protecting young people from legal obligations that could become burdensome. So the argument for the big bang, with everything happening at once at the age of 16, is not one that I necessarily accept. One should recognise that people have to grow into maturity and that to become an adult for all purposes overnight is not necessarily in the interests of young people.

6.45 pm

Certain anomalies about the current age of majority legislation are worth considering. The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) was correct to say that as legislators we had considered the merits and appropriateness of certain ages for certain purposes discretely. I strongly suspect that that is the right way to approach the subject. I hope that the suggestion that my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) made to the Minister will be taken up. It is time for a review of the law on the age of majority. It is more than 30 years since the Latey committee considered the issue in the round. Another such study has not been done. We would have been assisted in considering the discrete arguments about ages of majority if such an overview had been taken. I invite the Government to consider that and come back to the issue. However, it would not be appropriate to wrap up in a review of the age of majority the question of voting age, or to make it dependent on the outcome of such a review.

It was interesting that in 1969 the Labour Government decided to separate the issues clearly. They referred the age of majority to a Speaker's Conference. They firmly expected that the conference would recommend that the age of majority should be reduced for voting purposes to 18, in line with the view taken by the Latey committee on the wider aspects. That was not what the Speaker's Conference recommended. To the surprise of the then Lord Chancellor Gardiner, the Speaker's Conference recommended that the age of majority for voting purposes should be 20. That was a surprising recommendation. I remember being hauled before the late Lord Gardiner to explain my vote on that issue, because he expected me, as a member of his party, although not of his Government, to follow the party line. Others have subsequently been disabused of any hope that I would always follow the party line.

The reason why the Speaker's Conference took place when it did was that the then Government accepted the view expressed tonight by the hon. Member for Poole that for different purposes it was perfectly rational to consider different ages. The Labour Government paid no attention to the view of the Speaker's Conference and introduced legislation, commended it to the House and carried it, to reduce the age of voting to 18. They did so without my partisan support; they did so with some support from the Conservative party, but not bipartisan support. A decisive move was taken; it was taken not following an exercise such as that recommended by the hon. Member for Watford—of wrapping the question up and seeking consensus across the House. It was done on the basis of a Government initiative that enjoyed broad support, but it was not the result of any kind of consensus, desirable though consensus is in constitutional matters.

The lessons of 1969 are that we are right to raise the issue here in the context of the reform of our franchise and our voting systems, and of making the vote more accessible. I take that view because all who have spoken in this interesting debate have realised that alienation of the young from the political process is a problem. By means of the Bill, we want to make the process easier so that people can have a greater involvement in it.

We are all aware that there is no simple answer to the problem. In an intervention, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) asked why we should want to lower the voting age to 16, as it was difficult enough to persuade people aged between 18 and 30 to vote. One of the reasons that we should consider lowering the age is that it will help to focus the minds of the young on certain issues if, as adults, they have to make decisions at an earlier age. They may choose not to exercise their right to vote at the age of 16. However, even if they dislike the outcome of an election in which they did not vote, they will feel some responsibility for that outcome.

Mr. Fabricant: What evidence does the right hon. Gentleman have for that statement? What makes him believe that the right to vote at the age of 16 will focus people's minds such that they might vote on a future occasion, if those who could vote at 18 still do not vote when they are 30? That is the current practice.

Mr. Maclennan: I am not sure what evidence would be needed to convince the hon. Gentleman. Such evidence as I have is only anecdotal; it would not be conclusive. However, that is the nature of the debate on this subject. During the past 30 years, I have given much thought to the age of majority, but the evidence presented to the Latey committee and the Speaker's Conference mainly took the form of anecdotal accounts of people's views. I suspect that the views that I have received on the subject are not dissimilar to those received by the hon. Gentleman.

It is probably true that there is no great demand to vote among 16-year-olds. However, in schools in my constituency I have heard 16-year-olds forcibly express the view that they want the vote. That view is not universally held, but it is strongly held by some young people.

Jackie Ballard: Has my right hon. Friend considered that most—although not all—people entitled to vote at the

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age of 16 would still be at school? Most secondary schools hold mock elections at the time of a general election campaign. One could thus argue that young people have a more heightened awareness of the political process, and of the fact that voting is taking place, than people who are older and are out at work.

Mr. Maclennan: That is certainly true. I well remember that, during the last general election, I spoke at a school where several young people aged just under 18 expressed considerable frustration that they did not have the vote. I had some sympathy with them.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): May I trouble the right hon. Gentleman with another piece of anecdotal evidence? When I was 17, I was interested in politics; I looked forward to being able to vote, and regarded it as a privilege. If we reduce the age at which people can vote, might we not reduce their appreciation of the privilege of living in a democracy where they have the vote?

Mr. Maclennan: The hon. Gentleman's point reminds me that, throughout the debate, I have felt strongly that I wanted to alter the emphasis of our approach to this matter. There has been much talk of the entitlement to vote—the right to vote. It is time we acknowledged that we are talking about more than that: to vote is an important duty of citizenship. It is a sign of maturation that that duty has arrived. Sixteen is not too young to assume the duty of considering the impact of one's political views on the shaping of the decisions of public authorities. I would like to think that, from the age of 16, an informed interest would begin to develop and that that process would be assisted by the knowledge that, if an election were to take place, people would have the right to use their judgment as to how to influence society.

Mr. Fabricant: I was fascinated by the right hon. Gentleman's use of the word "duty". What is his view of the system in Australia and in other countries, where voting is compulsory? If voting is a duty, should people be compelled to vote? And if people are compelled to vote, does the right hon. Gentleman think that they will think about the political and voting processes?

Mr. Maclennan: Duty, and legal obligation, are not identical. I do not favour making the duty to vote a legal obligation. None the less, voting remains a duty of citizenship. I hope that serious consideration will be given to the possibility that the duty to vote would stimulate discussion among young people—many of whom would still be at school—about participation in democracy. They would not have to wait until they left school to participate.

However, if not all 16-year-olds voted, I should not regard that as calamitous; it would not be a good reason for not allowing them to have the vote. To reduce the voting age would bring forward the process of political maturation through political awareness and discussion. Young people would discuss among themselves the fact not only that they are affected by the decisions of Government, but that they are able to influence those decisions.

I do not find wholly persuasive the argument that there is no public demand. The hon. Member for Walsall, North pointed out that, in one sense, there was no public demand when the voting age and the age for the exercise of other legal obligations were reduced to 18. That was to be expected. Few constitutional issues give rise to express public demand until there is the most pressing hardship. There was no massive public demand for a Bill of Rights; however, it was wise to include that matter in the election manifesto and to introduce legislation.

I hope that the Government will agree not only that the debate has been interesting and persuasive, but that the House would be glad to have their support on the matter. Even if the Government are not ready to support the amendment, I hope that some Members are persuaded of the merits of the argument and will not consider it a sin against the Patronage Secretary, or anyone else, to express their view and to vote accordingly.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): The debate has been interesting. It is important that we are holding it. We have heard some good contributions; they have led me to consider matters that I had not previously thought about. In essence, the amendment makes us think about how we modernise our democracy—what sort of democracy we want and how it can fit into the modern times in which we live.

It is crucial that the Bill and other measures contribute to dealing with the alienation that appals all of us. An important aspect of that is the age at which we consider it appropriate that people should exercise the right to vote. The lowering of the voting age deserves serious consideration. If I were making laws on my own, I would accept that the age should be reduced to 16. People should be able to exercise their democratic right at that age.

I shall set out some of the arguments that persuaded me that the age of the franchise should be changed. Over the past few weeks and years, many of us have visited schools and talked to students. I taught in schools and, for 20 years, I tried to enthuse young people with the democratic process. Although we could not often enthuse them about the party-political process, students were not unwilling to discuss the issues of the day.

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Young people in schools and youth clubs have talked to us about the issues of fundamental importance to them. They have challenged us about the environment, law and order, third world debt, unemployment, pollution and issues in their local communities. I do not know the experience of other Members, but when I am challenged in a school sixth form, I do not find that the students show a lack of maturity or understanding of the issues that confront them. In many respects, it is particularly difficult to argue with them. They often say politely, "We're not going to take any rubbish from you," although they sometimes put it another way.

One argument that is often used against lowering the age at which people can vote is that young people lack maturity. I have experience of young people and have listened to the views that they have expressed in schools and youth clubs. Their maturity and understanding of many of the fundamental issues that affect us all are quite refreshing.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman's experiences are similar to my own. When I speak in schools in my

constituency, I meet people who are mature and have strong views on a range of issues. The hon. Gentleman has enunciated some of them. However, have any of the students that he has met told him that they want to vote at the age of 16?

Mr. Coaker: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, that is the whole purpose of the debate and of the amendment. He is saying that, because no one has ever raised the issue with me, we should not discuss it. However, we should discuss the issue and when we go to schools and youth clubs or speak to young people in employment, we should ask them whether they think it appropriate for us to discuss the age at which they can vote. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's argument. The fact that the subject has never been raised does not mean that we should not consider what we should do. Young people bring to the issues an idealism and lack of cynicism that it is important for us as a democracy to capture. If we can harness that enthusiasm, dynamism and youthful vigour, we will be able to improve our democracy.

In answer to the question of why we should extend the franchise, I say that that is the logical extension of the Government's drive—and the desire of us all—to build on citizenship education in our schools. If we believe that the curriculum should do more to encourage young people to understand and be involved in the political process and to discuss the issues, the logical extension of that is to consider the appropriate age at which they should be able to have the franchise. I think that we should certainly consider the age of 16.

Reducing the age at which people can vote would encourage participation in the political process and lead to improved participation rates. It is not a party- political argument. Real issues are involved. The House of Commons research paper on the Bill estimates that

"about 40 per cent. of 18 to 24 year olds in Britain did not vote in 1997."

That is in none of our interests. I do not want to be pious or holier than thou about this—I would prefer them to vote Labour—but it is important that they vote. It undermines our whole democracy if nearly half the people in that age group do not vote. We need to discuss why they do not vote, and there is a powerful argument to say that we can tackle that issue by extending the franchise.

The vote is symbolic. In extensions of the franchise in the past, it was not just the physical act of voting that was important. Being able to vote is symbolic of the fact that one is part of the democracy in which one lives. Extending that dramatic symbolism to 16-year-olds would enable us to start to say something to them about the importance of the political process and of their being involved in their democracy.

I acknowledge the points made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). As a Parliament, we need to discuss the related age issues. There are no easy answers and we can make good debating points about the age at which we should be able to do certain things. At present, we can marry, pay taxes and national insurance, drive and determine our sexuality before we are allowed to play a full part in civil and political society. At the very least, we should consider whether that is right.

We allow young people of 16 to join the armed forces and we allow 17-year-olds to enter hostilities. I have examined the figures. In the Royal Navy, there are 816 17-year-olds; in the Royal Air Force, there are 403; and in the Army, there are 4,105. This issue transcends party politics. If 17-year-olds are considered old enough to enter hostilities on behalf of this country, we should at least ask whether they should be given the right to vote.

The amendment has given the House the opportunity to debate the hugely important issue of extending the franchise. Alongside that debate are other questions about what we consider to be the appropriate ages for a whole range of other activities. However, the core of this debate is how we reinvigorate and regenerate our democracy, which is creaking in certain areas. Extending the franchise can build on the improvement to citizenship education in schools and it is a fundamental question for us. We should consider it and look for the proper way forward.

Mr. Fabricant: I listened with considerable interest to the hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker). He made what I thought was a very impassioned argument in favour of voting at the age of 16, so I shall be curious to see whether he joins the Liberal Democrats in the Lobby if they force the amendment to a vote.

The hon. Gentleman completely misunderstood the purpose of my intervention. I agree with him that the question of whether young people are demanding the right to vote at 16 is irrelevant to our debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on tabling the amendment. Consideration of the Bill should enable us to re-examine the age at which people are allowed to vote. That is an important issue.

I am not convinced that 16 is the appropriate age. I was interested in the argument of the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward), who pointed out rather well that it is a strange anomaly that one can vote at the age of 18, but that one has to be 21 before one can become a Member of Parliament. I suggest to the Minister that that matter needs to be dealt with in the near future. If people are old enough to vote, they should be old enough to be elected to the Chamber, or at least to put themselves up for election. That is a reasonable argument.

I am not as convinced by the argument of the hon. Member for Watford on not forcing the matter to a vote. She said that she had had lengthy discussions on the issue with young people in her constituency. I suspect that she has also had lengthy discussions with the Whips on it, and will be uncomfortable if there is a vote.

I quoted earlier the famous song "Eve of Destruction" by Barry McGuire:

"Old enough to kill, but not for voting,

And even the Jordan river has bodies floating,

And you tell me, we're not on the Eve of Destruction".

The hon. Member for Gedling made a good point when he said that people were old enough at 17 to be involved in conflict. There are 17-year-olds in the conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia, but they are not old enough to vote. That is a strange anomaly.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Is not the real answer that 17-year-olds should not be in conflict, rather than the other way around?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman raises a fascinating point. Unfortunately, there are problems in

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recruitment. I suspect that a recruitment age of 17 has been forced on the armed forces. However, if there were no problems with recruitment, I would agree with him. Anyway, is anyone old enough to kill and be killed? The answer is probably not. Where do we draw the line? The hon. Gentleman raises a valid point.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend, but, unless I am mistaken—perhaps it has been dealt with before; I have not been able to attend the whole debate because I have been at a Select Committee—there are no 17-year-old British soldiers in Kosovo, or serving in areas of conflict. They are certainly not allowed to go to Northern Ireland until they are 18. I think that that applies to other operational areas as well.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is an expert on such matters. It is interesting that there is at least synchronicity between voting and going into conflict—both can be done at 18—although if, God forbid, this country were ever involved in a fullscale war, I suspect that 17-year-olds would be engaged. I invite him to intervene if I have it wrong. I believe that the current regulations within the armed forces are that people are ready and able to go into conflict from the age of 17 onwards.

Mr. Robathan *indicated assent.*

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend confirms that that is right, so there is that inconsistency.

I was fascinated by the speech of the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), who talked about maturation being uneven. He is right. Some people are very mature at 16; others are immature. Although I would not wish to stray from the issue at hand, I often felt that one of the failings of the 11-plus was that it was held at 11, although I took it at the age of 10. Just for the record, I passed.

Mr. Pound: Under what name?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman makes a sarcastic remark from a sedentary position, but, as he helped me earlier with the quote from Barry McGuire, I shall not pursue that issue. However, the system of entry into public schools at the age of 13, when there is greater commonality of maturity, is sensible. It is a great shame that we did not have a 13-plus instead of an 11-plus.

Should 16 be universally adopted—the point was raised by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross? I do not know; I am not sure. Although I like to think of myself as a very young, energetic and fit person, I was reminded by someone only this lunchtime that I will suffer my 50th birthday next year. I will not be holding a party as I hope the whole thing will be forgotten very rapidly.

7.15 pm

The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross raised an interesting point in passing; I wonder whether it was in the notes of his speech. He felt that young and, indeed, old people have a duty to vote. He rightly pointed out that there is a difference between a duty and a legal obligation. I might be tempted to table an amendment, if there is not one already, so that we can debate—whether we force the matter to a vote, I do not know—whether there should be a legal obligation to vote.

A number of hon. Members, both Labour and Conservative, have said that young people are not voting. I wonder whether a legal obligation to vote, or at least to turn up to a voting station—as exists in Australia and, I think, Switzerland—would force many more people to vote than simply giving 16-year-olds the opportunity to vote.

Therefore, I believe that 16 is probably too young. I do not think that one can have a commonality of age for different things. After all, people have to be 18, I believe, to drive.

Ms Ward: Seventeen.

Mr. Fabricant: It is 17; I thank the hon. Lady. People have to be 18 to drink—I know that—but 16 to go into a pub; that seems rather perverse. As she has said, people have to be 21 to be a Member of Parliament.

I will not support the amendment in the Lobby, but, as I have said, I welcome the fact that the amendment has been tabled. It has provided a useful opportunity to discuss the matter. As hon. Members on both sides of the House have said, the matter should be revisited regularly and discussed in the House of Commons.

Mr. Evans: It has been an important and enjoyable debate, but the amendment should be resisted. Sixteen-year-olds are obviously more intelligent than the average Liberal Democrat, but I do not believe that that is a sufficiently compelling reason to give them the vote.

I have mentioned that, in my seven and a bit years as a Member of Parliament, I have not received one letter on the issue. I accept that, just because people are not writing to us on various issues, it does not mean that we should not lead the way. There again, even in my discussions with youngsters, none of them said that the voting age should be reduced.

Mr. Barnes: Hon. Members have said generally that they have never received any representations on the matter, but I have just conducted a United Nations Children's Fund "Meet the MPs" surgery and it was raised there. I brought away a number of unanswered questions for written answers. Today, I answered someone in connection with the point.

Mr. Evans: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being perhaps the only Member of Parliament to have the matter raised.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The point has also been raised with me at my advice surgery. Will the hon. Gentleman apply the same test to all the amendments that he has tabled for discussion during consideration of the Bill—the test of whether he has received letters on the subject?

Mr. Evans: Clearly not. Obviously, hon. Members have received some representations on the matter in some way, shape or form—but I suspect not many. That does

not mean that the debate should not have taken place. In many ways, I am glad that it has. Perhaps it will not only increase the interest of 16 to 18-year-olds in getting the vote, but encourage more 18 to 24-year-olds who already have the vote to use it. As the hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) pointed out, many do not. It must disturb all of us that 40 per cent. of them did not vote at the last general election.

We have heard many arguments. The taxation argument has been used. I do not believe that, if people pay tax, they should get the vote. The reverse is also true: if they do not pay tax, that should not mean that they do not get the vote. It is nonsense. The taxation argument is weak.

The hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) utilised the multi-age argument. She felt that we should have one age and it should be 16. She felt that the age for voting should be 16, but she would not support that this evening because we were not reducing the age for everything else to 16. From now on, that sort of thing will be known as the Watford gap. If the hon. Lady sincerely believes in her arguments, she should go into the Lobby with the Liberal Democrats to support the amendment, perhaps accompanied by the hon. Member for Gedling and one or two other hon. Members.

I have read all about the laws governing the European Parliament elections—a ripping read, no doubt available in all good bookshops. In all EU states, the age at which one is allowed to vote in European Parliament elections—and, I imagine, all others—is 18. I am not sure what Norway's voting age is, but I suspect that it is probably 18 as well—Norway is so good on all things European. In some of our neighbouring countries, one is able to do all sorts of weird and wonderful things at widely differing ages. A research paper on the age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual acts reveals that it varies widely throughout the EU: it is 14 in Austria, 12 in Spain and 16 in Luxembourg; and in the UK, the age of consent for homosexual acts is 18. Therefore, a multiplicity of ages is used throughout the EU.

I agree that there is an anomaly about the age at which one can stand for election. That one can vote at 18, but not stand for election to Parliament until one is 21, is certainly anomalous. The Home Affairs Committee examined that issue and decided that matters should remain as they are. However, it is interesting to note that in seven EU countries, one may stand for election at 18; one may stand at 19 in Austria, at 21 in five other EU countries, at 23 in France and at 25 in Italy—despite the fact that in all those countries, the voting age is 18.

Our opposition to the amendment should not be regarded as a slight by 16 and 17-year-olds. The hon. Member for Gedling mentioned that, although under-16s are not as interested in joining political parties as they once were, they often show strong interest in political issues that affect them and the world in general. My discussions with young people have ranged over many issues, including the environment, both domestic and global. I find it heartening that they are concerned about such matters, not only for their own sakes, but for the sake of future generations. Young people also take an interest in animal welfare and many other serious issues. Therefore, just because they do not have the vote, we should not think that everyone under the age of 18 is uninterested in political issues.

The line has to be drawn somewhere and, in matters of age restriction, a balance has to be struck and a judgment made. All of us have knocked on doors when canvassing for votes and been told by someone, "I turn 18 the day after the general election." It almost seems as though that one day has cheated them of the opportunity to vote. I do not believe that an additional 24 hours on this earth gives anyone the wisdom needed to participate in elections, but the fact is that the line has been drawn. The Liberal Democrats say that the voting age should be 16, but why stop there? Why not make it 15, 14 or even seven? The Liberal Democrats have chosen to draw the line at 16, but that is just as artificial as drawing it at 18. Our view is that 18 is an appropriate age: for many people, education ends and citizenship is extended at that age.

We have often discussed the problem of 18 to 24-year-olds not voting. Before the general election, I did my bit by getting involved with the "Rock the Vote" campaign to get young people interested in voting. I went to the launch of the campaign at the Ministry of Sound—I am not sure whether any of my hon. Friends have been there recently, but I suspect that they have not. The issue concerns all parties and we all got involved in the campaign to get young people to register and to vote. Unfortunately, the statistics in the Library paper reveal that the campaign was not as successful as we had hoped it would be, so we have to consider other ways of encouraging more young people to vote.

That has to be achieved by educating young people in schools about citizenship and voting. At the time of general elections, many of my local schools hold mock polls, in which young people stand as candidates and participate in the election process. In the late 1960s, when I was at school, I participated in such elections—indeed, I stood as a Conservative candidate in one of them. I lost that election, which prepared me well for the many other elections that I have subsequently lost.

Mr. Robathan: My hon. Friend will be aware that, at a similar age, the Prime Minister also declared his allegiance by standing as a Conservative candidate. Now, he hides that allegiance behind new Labour.

Mr. Evans: We remember it well, but, in the spirit of understanding and reconciliation, I shall not pursue that point.

We have to use education to get across to young people the message about voting. We should also exploit facilities such as the internet. The House of Commons has excellent pages where young people can look up what has been said and what documents are available. All the political parties have an internet site, as do many individual Members of Parliament—mine is www.nigelmp.com, and I am sure that many hon. Members will now rush off to have a look at it. In addition, we all encourage young people to join youth organisations.

Mr. Fabricant: I remind my hon. Friend that, here at the House of Commons, there is an incredibly good

[Mr. Fabricant]

education unit which will visit schools in various constituencies with its travelling roadshow. Sadly, far too few Members of Parliament—

The Temporary Chairman (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. I am sure that the Library will be grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the advertisement, but we should return to consideration of the amendment.

Mr. Evans: I urge all Members of Parliament to speak to young people who visit the House of Commons in the summer. For the past six years, I have spoken to them about the work of a Member of Parliament, which helps to prepare them for the time when they are able to vote.

Today's debate will not end with the Division; it will continue well into the future. We all have a duty and an obligation to our constituents to encourage as many as possible to show an interest in politics, to get involved and, not least, to use the vote that was so hard fought for in general elections, local elections and European elections.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): This has been a worthwhile, interesting and, at times, lively debate. We have heard high-quality speeches from, among others, my hon. Friends the Members for Watford (Ms Ward), for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) and the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms). No one can dismiss the issues raised in the debate and no one would try to do so. The Government take them seriously and I hope to persuade the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) to do so as well.

It might help the House if I briefly set out the history of the issues. The age of majority was reviewed in the mid-1960s by the Latey committee, which in 1967 recommended that the age of majority be lowered. For most purposes, that was achieved by the Family Law Reform Act 1969; but, for electoral purposes, as a result of a similar recommendation, it was reduced from 21 to 18 by the Representation of the People Act 1969. That remains the position.

7.30 pm

Obviously it would not be wise to give the right to vote to all people, no matter what their age. So an age must be chosen at which it can be accepted that most people are sufficiently politically aware, mature and independent to make up their minds and choose between the various election candidates. A balance must be struck in deciding that age. Doubtless all of us know people under 18 who exhibit wisdom and responsibility and could be trusted to exercise the franchise sensibly. Equally, we can probably all think of people over 18 who lack the necessary maturity to make responsible decisions.

That brings me back to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, who says that there is no absolutism about these matters. I agree with him. It is also a truism that there is more likely to be a higher percentage of people aged 18 who are able to exercise judgment properly with maturity and independence than of those aged 16. Eighteen is the most common voting age throughout the world, and we believe that it is still the most appropriate minimum age.

These are serious issues that deserve to be debated. However, it is important that changes are brought forward with a degree of consensus. The Bill is the result of an all-party working group and a significant degree of cross-party support and agreement about the way forward. We may disagree about some of the details but there is a broad consensus that many of the ideas set out in the Bill are good ones that can command broad support. Indeed, representatives of each of the major political parties were on the working party that recommended the proposals that we are discussing in considering the Bill.

The Liberal Democrats' proposal to reduce the voting age to 16 has not had the same degree of broad-based support. It is regrettable that in bringing forward this idea they have not sought the support of Conservative Members, Labour Members and others by securing their agreement to put their names to the amendment.

As I have said, the issue deserves to be treated seriously and discussed in an all-party context. I suggest that the Select Committee on Home Affairs might be the appropriate venue. An appropriate cross-party group, of which there are several, might properly consider it.

It was interesting that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said that he did not want piecemeal legislation on the age of majority. If he were to press the amendment to a vote, that is precisely what he would be urging upon the Committee.

As the hon. Member for Poole said, there are arguments for different ages of majority. Perhaps these need to be considered, but I suggest that they are not matters for the Government to examine internally. Perhaps the Select Committee on Home Affairs or another all-party group might be appropriate bodies to consider them and to decide whether it is right to have a certain age or a number of different ages.

It is important to get young people involved in political issues. However, I am not convinced that lowering the age of voting will do very much to bring about a significant change in the interest that young people take in political issues.

Interestingly, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey did not refer to the anomaly—it was taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for Watford and by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant)—that people can vote at 18 but are unable to stand for Parliament or even a local council. They have to wait until they are 21. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should have taken up the argument. It is much more difficult to justify because in many ways there is an anomaly. There are arguments in favour of a voting age of 21, but I will not outline them now.

The hon. Gentleman's proposal would increase the disparity between the voting age, if it were to be 16, and the age of 21 at which people could stand for election to Parliament or a local council. He has put forward no solution that would deal with that issue. These are complex matters that need to be debated in a cross-party and consensual way, not within Government but in another forum. The working party has ended its deliberations. I have not read the article to which the hon. Gentleman referred but, as I understand it, the working party did not consider the issue. Perhaps he should not

believe all that he reads in the newspapers, no matter how reputable some of the journalists no doubt are. I think that the issue should be taken forward in a non-governmental way. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will consider that approach rather than pressing the matter to a Division.

I appreciate the strength of feeling that Members on both sides of the Chamber have expressed. I do not dismiss the idea because it is one worthy of debate. However, I am not convinced by the argument that people should be able to vote at 16. There are routes other than pushing the amendment to a Division. The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross said that the Latey committee sought to bring forward these matters in a consensual way, and I think that that is the appropriate approach. I hope that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will see fit to withdraw the amendment. If the issue is to be taken seriously, it needs to be pursued in an all-party manner.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford was right to say that if the hon. Gentleman presses the amendment to a vote, I shall charge the Liberal Democrats with not being serious. I charge them with grandstanding and indulging in political gestures. The hon. Gentleman has been given advice on how to take the matter forward. We shall now see if the Liberal Democrats have the maturity to exercise judgment. In many ways, the issue is a test of their maturity. Are they scoring party political points or are they serious? I say seriously that they should not demean the seriousness of the argument. Let them take it forward in a consensual way, seek a cross-party approach and treat young people with the seriousness that they deserve. They should not divide the Committee.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Until two minutes ago, this had been a good-natured and non-party political debate. I am sad that the Minister spoiled it in the past two minutes.

We have had a good debate with Members from the north, the midlands, the south of England and Scotland taking part, the majority of whom were in favour of the proposition that I and my hon. Friends have put forward. If the Minister heard my original remarks, he would have heard me saying that my party is both committed to reducing the age of voting to 16 and to reducing the age at which people can stand for elections to 18. Therefore, widening the gap between the two ages is not our position—the gap would be narrower if the two ages were reduced.

The Minister sought to say, and I had argued, that everything should be looked at in the round. I put two propositions to the Committee. First, we should accept that now is the time to move to voting at 16. Secondly, we should consider in the round the age of majority and all the other issues. I was hoping for an indication from the Minister that the Home Office was willing to do that. Sadly, that was not given. My right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) reminds me and the Committee that when the Latey committee did its work—he was there at the time—that was the subject of general consideration. The Labour Government's proposal, produced by the late Harold Wilson, reduced the voting age from 21 to 18, but that was not the result of a consensual agreement. It was a proposition that could be taken on its own.

Two questions have been asked. First, is there a commitment to a reduction in the voting age to 16? In Westminster Hall, where there have been great gatherings of young people in recent years, there has been a demand. There have been letters, and many young people raise the issue. I organised a Youth Parliament in a Committee Room some weeks ago, and the issue was raised then. I believe that there is a demand, and there is academic support for that in studies from Loughborough and Nottingham universities, which make it clear that only 5 per cent. of those under 19—a much younger group was also polled—thought that voting was a waste of time.

I shall put one final argument to the Committee after a good debate. It justifies constitutional matters being dealt with on the Floor of the House. At 16, young people go from being under authority to being free from authority. They are free to make their own choices, by and large. They have just come out of the period of compulsory education, when citizenship, voting and the electoral system are taught. They are usually settled in their homes and have not started to be mobile.

It is much more likely that 16 to 18-year-olds would vote than people who are slightly older. They are more settled and their education would be more relevant if it taught them that a chance to vote was about to come, than if it taught them about some vote a long time in the future.

We will not misinterpret colleagues who say that they cannot vote with us because the time is not right. This is a historic vote for Parliament and the Committee. It is the first time that young people under 18 will see it put to a Committee of Parliament that they should have the opportunity to vote. We ask colleagues in all parts of the House to support us. We have made the point and flagged up the proposition. If the Government defeat us tonight, we will go on to work with the Government and others. It is not one or the other: it is vote tonight and collaborate to make sure that we debate the issue across parties and in other places in the days ahead.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 36, Noes 434.

Division No. 20] **[7.41 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Brake, Tom
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Corbyn, Jeremy
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Grogan, John
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McDonnell, John
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Moore, Michael
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Robert Smith and Jackie Ballard.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy

Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Butterfill, John
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Drew, David
Duncan, Alan
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fraser, Christopher
Fyfe, Maria
Gale, Roger
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Grant, Bernie
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Madel, Sir David
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Maxton, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Paice, James
Palmer, Dr Nick
Paterson, Owen

Pearson, Ian
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prior, David
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Ryan, Ms Joan
St Aubyn, Nick
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soames, Nicholas
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Streeter, Gary
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move amendment No. 30, in page 1, leave out lines 20 to 23.

The Temporary Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 32, in page 2, leave out lines 9 to 14.

No. 33, in page 2, line 20, leave out "is resident" and insert

"has his sole or main residence".

No. 9, in page 2, line 24, leave out "and".

No. 10, in page 2, line 25, at end insert

" ; and

(e) in making his application for registration or his declaration of local connection or his service declaration, states all other addresses in respect of which he had at any time within the period of twelve months preceding the relevant date been registered in the register of parliamentary electors for any constituency or part of a constituency.".

No. 35, in page 2, line 35, leave out "is resident" and insert

"has his sole or main residence".

No. 11, in page 2, line 39, leave out "and".

No. 12, in page 2, line 40, at end insert

" ; and

(e) in making his application for registration or his declaration of local connection or his service declaration, states all other addresses in respect of which he had at any time within the period of twelve months preceding the relevant date been registered in the register of local government electors for any electoral area.".

No. 14, in clause 6, page 8, line 23, at end insert—

"(g) whether the declarant is registered in the register of parliamentary electors for any other constituency or for any other part of a constituency and, if so, the name of that constituency or part of a constituency".

Mr. Barnes: Earlier, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) pointed out that an amendment appeared only in my name. That applies to amendments Nos. 30, 32, 33 and 35. However, as I said earlier, some amendments on rolling registers that stood only in my name in the past were accepted, and their proposals have become common practice for the Government.

The purpose of the amendment is to end double or multiple electoral registrations. A person who has more than one residence currently qualifies to appear on more than one register. However, it is illegal to use more than one vote on the same day, although there is no means of checking whether people have been dishonest and have fraudulently voted more than once.

A fully fledged rolling register should ensure that double registration does not take place. I have tabled amendments—some have cross-party support—that try to extend the provision for a rolling register and build on the Government's proposals. We shall discuss some of those matters later. We want the rolling register to be fully fledged so that, as soon as people move from one part of the country to another, their names are put on the new area's register and deleted from that of the previous area. Such a system removes the need for double registration and its attendant problems.

If we want to know the exact number of electors in the country, double registration does not help us. The Government are tackling some problems: for example, they intend to make arrangements to remove from registers the names of people who have died. Their presence on registers renders current figures inaccurate when calculating turnout.

[Mr. Barnes]

The amendment would provide clarity and ensure that someone was registered in one place for voting and could transfer registration only on moving.

8 pm

Mr. Grieve: I am intrigued by the hon. Gentleman's argument. I listened carefully to his earlier argument about votes for foreign visitors to this country, although I fail to see the logic of the position that he is adopting on this matter. People are much more mobile, often have homes in different locations and have multiple residences. If they wish to vote only once, why should they be deprived of the opportunity to choose where in the United Kingdom they cast that vote?

Mr. Barnes: We need a modern, up-to-date electoral registration system precisely because we have a mobile, rootless society in which people move around a great deal or leave bedsitter land to become homeless or live in another area. The rolling register is intended to produce such a system. I believe that the Government version of it is a shadow of what we could have, but, given modern technology, it should be possible for one place to be considered a person's sole or main place of residence. That is where he would register.

Mr. Robathan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Barnes: In a moment.

Amendment No. 35 allows for such provision to be made. The notion of a sole or main place of residence was introduced by the Conservative Government in the Local Government Finance Act 1988, which introduced the poll tax. People had to register for their main poll tax payments at their sole or main place of residence and, although they paid poll tax for their other residences, arrangements to change the sole or main place of residence could be made quickly when they moved. If that principle could be used for an anti-social measure that cleared masses of people off the electoral register and destroyed electoral registration—attainers, who appeared on the register for the first time, hid from it because their household would have had to make multiple payments—it is only justice to introduce a measure that will help to restore full electoral registration.

The principle of a person having a sole or main place of residence can be used in such a connection. Even if a person has multiple residences, he will be associated mostly with one place and must decide which will appear on the register. If his life style changes and he wants to call another of his homes his sole or main place of residence, the rolling register will make that possible.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Robathan *rose—*

Mr. Barnes: I said that I would give way to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan).

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman has raised so many points that I must prevent myself from making a speech, although I must ask why a person who has to pay council tax on each home should not also have a vote. I want to pick up a point that was referred to on Second Reading. He is trying to prevent people from voting more than once. Is it not about time that the Government—I am not referring in particular to the Labour Government or the previous Conservative Government—checked up to ensure that people have not voted more than once? I do not think that we have heard any promise on that yet.

Mr. Barnes: People cannot purchase the vote because they pay a certain amount of tax or council tax. Technically, people are allowed to vote only once. A system that checked the current arrangements to make sure that nobody was abusing them would be useful, but, if the method that I propose were adopted, that would become terribly unnecessary. People would be on one register at any time, it would be illegal to be on another register and there would be nothing to prevent a central system—a link between different electoral registers—from making sure of that. That can be done in connection with the purchase of lottery tickets, so we must be able to do it with franchise rights, which are far more important.

Mr. Hogg: May I take the hon. Gentleman back to our first debate, in which we both participated? He made a point that had certain intellectual logic, asking why overseas voters resident in the United Kingdom and affected by laws were not entitled to vote. He has tabled an amendment that would prevent a person from registering in more than one local government area. If a person has a number of properties, he is affected by local government tax—the council tax—wherever he registers. Is it not right that, as he is affected by the level of council tax in respect of all his properties, he should have a local government vote in respect of each local government area?

Mr. Barnes: Certainly not. Every person should have the franchise; every person should count merely as one and should therefore be able to vote only in the area that he chooses. If someone is wealthy enough to have properties all over the place, lucky for him, but why should he have a say in how local government works in umpteen places? One person, one vote is what we should have.

Mr. Robathan *rose—*

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

The Temporary Chairman: Order. Will the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) say to whom he is giving way?

Mr. Barnes: I am giving way to the hon. Member for Blaby.

Mr. Robathan: I am grateful to you, Mrs. Dunwoody, and to the hon. Gentleman. I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) will add his remarks later. Does the hon. Gentleman remember the great cry, "No taxation without representation"? Local taxation concerns local issues, such as what is spent on the road outside my house. If I owned two houses—I regret to say that I do not—surely I should be able to influence rubbish collection,

road maintenance and what is done in schools. I pay two council taxes because I rent a house by my constituency. As I pay council tax, surely I should be allowed to vote in local council elections.

Mr. Barnes: It is entirely inappropriate that people should be able to choose several main areas and main concerns. If they are lucky enough to own all sorts of property, good for them, but why should they have all sorts of influence over what the authorities do in those areas? Remember, they have a vote in general elections, which determine what the law of the land will be. That includes decisions on local government finance, the standard spending assessment and other measures, so they are in the system and they are in it on the same basis as the poorest person in society, who should—at least on election day—have the same right as the mightiest in the land.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Is not there an argument converse to that put by the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan)? If there is no taxation without representation, there ought to be no representation without taxation. There are consequences to people having a right to influence the area in which they live simply because they live there; people who do not live in that area should not have a right to such influence. That being so, the hon. Gentleman will no doubt vote with me on my amendment to abolish the overseas vote.

Mr. Barnes: I am certainly with my right hon. Friend in connection with the overseas vote. In respect of our earlier debate, I tabled amendments concerning people from overseas who have settled in this country having the right to vote on the same basis as Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens. I used exactly the same argument and it should apply to who we decide to enfranchise in this country. It should also operate in relation to people who go overseas. We should argue for them to be enfranchised overseas, but once they return they should be put back on the register.

Mr. Hogg: I want the position to be made absolutely clear. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that, although it is right that no one can have more than one vote in a general election, he is proposing to take away existing rights in respect of local government elections in which local government electors can vote more than once if they have a number of properties in different local government areas.

Mr. Barnes: On this issue, I am in the tradition of the Chartists and the suffragettes and people who believe in one person, one vote. That arrangement should have been entered into years ago. The system that operates in general elections should apply to local government elections. There should not be privileged people who, because of their wealth, have more votes than other people. Members of Parliament with residencies in London and in their constituencies where they mainly reside should not be able to vote in two places. That would be open to abuse. There should be one person, one vote in any election.

Mr. Kaufman: The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) forgets what took place not under the Chartists but under the Attlee Government, when people had two votes in local elections: they had the residential vote and the business vote. They were able to vote twice in the same area or in two different areas. The Conservative party has always supported fancy franchises.

Mr. Barnes: The points made by Conservative Members have a resonance in the past. People also had two votes for the university seats, which were abolished in 1948. We should not allow a system in which people have two votes. In a democracy, everyone in the country who is covered by its laws and operations should have a say in elections on the basis of equality. Equality means one person, one vote.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his forbearance. Earlier, we discussed the issue of foreign residents. The hon. Gentleman must know that one of the consequences of our tolerance of dual nationalities is that many people can vote in this country and in another country at general elections. Under the principles enunciated by the hon. Gentleman, they also have an unfair advantage, one which he was previously prepared to promote and extend, but is now seeking to restrict. I do not follow the logic of his argument.

Mr. Barnes: Perhaps in time we will put that right. I believe that people should have the vote in the place in which they are resident. If people have dual nationality, that should make no difference. They may reside in a country of which they are not a national, and that is where they should vote. There is nothing inconsistent about the principle that I was propounding.

There may be a problem with students. Under single registration, where should a student register? The Bill improves the operation of postal voting. If students register in the place where they study, that should present no great difficulty when they go back to their home residence during the long summer break. However, if we had a modern, rolling electoral registration system, students could decide that while they are settled in the area where they are studying that is their sole and main place of residence, but during the long summer vacation their home is their sole and main place of residence, and their voting rights could be transferred accordingly. The system should allow us to handle that.

The problem that I have with the other amendments is that, unless some of the later amendments that I have tabled are carried, they will detract from the principle that I am trying to establish. It is important that we consider whether double registration should be allowed, or whether we should have rolling registers to prevent that. Difficulties may arise if people can vote in different areas for local government elections and for parliamentary elections and by-elections.

8.15 pm

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) should cast his mind back to what he said, very eloquently, in the first debate. He made the point that if people are in the United Kingdom, even if they are residents and citizens of an overseas country, they should be entitled to vote in UK elections. He justified that by arguing that they are affected by the consequences of Government policy in the

[Mr. Hogg]

United Kingdom, so they should have a say in the choice of that Government. That was a respectable argument—he knows that I disagree, but no matter, because it had a certain amount of force.

Let us consider his argument in the context of what he is now proposing. I have no great difficulty with amendment No. 30 with regard to the general election. We have long accepted that people should have only one vote in a general election. It could be on the basis of a main or sole residence. That is not something that I would particularly recommend, because the present law has caused no problems, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) about the right of choice. However, that is not a fundamental difficulty.

What is a fundamental difficulty is when we come to local government elections. The point that I was trying to make in my intervention on the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire was that, if people have more than one property in more than one local government area, they inevitably pay more than one set of local authority taxes. It would be quite wrong if they were under an obligation to pay taxes but had no say over the composition of the local authority that levied those taxes. The proposition that those who pay taxes must have a say in the choice of the authority that levies them is essential to democracy within the society of which we have been speaking.

Mr. David Heath: Under the present system of council tax, if people have multiple residences they establish one place as their principle residence and pay an abated council tax for the others. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman think that they should pay the full council tax for each residence and have equal democratic rights?

Mr. Hogg: In a mobile society, some people inevitably have to have more than one residence. They may not necessarily have ownership: they may be tenants. Many hon. Members, because of the nature of our work, have to have two residences. That is not confined to Members of Parliament. Many people in society have to have two residences, and some of them are not on particularly large incomes. We should consider the propriety of levying two full sets of council tax on two or more properties. Those people would face too large a burden if we were to decide to do that. I would not go along that road, because it would have an inequitable result for people on modest incomes.

Mr. Barnes: What cuts me to the quick is the criticism that I am inconsistent. People have often said that I am consistent—consistently wrong. I like to be logically correct in these matters. I have not argued that the payment of taxes should be the basis for registration; I have said that if people live in a society and are affected by the decisions made on a whole host of issues—health and safety, the environment and others—they should have a say in its operation. It is more difficult to use that argument against me on the local government franchise, because people have one vote according to their sole or main place of residence.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is right. In the first debate, he used the term "affected". He, of course, had in mind taxation, but I am perfectly willing to accept that he was also referring to the other consequences of living in a society, such as the impact of the criminal law on people's activities. That is also true, albeit to a lesser extent, in local government areas.

Local authorities have the power—albeit a much lesser power—to regulate life in their communities. It is not just a question of their levying tax; they do many other things that impact on the citizen. The argument is not confined to taxation: it relates to the power of regulation vested in local authorities.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Do we not encounter certain logical difficulties and contradictions when departing from the principle of one person, one vote, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) has referred? Must not the logic applying to the making of financial contributions in more than one area also apply to those making contributions under the Child Support Act 1991? Such people might legitimately argue that the same principle of buying votes should apply to them, in the same measure.

The Temporary Chairman: Order. I feel that some interventions are almost becoming speeches.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman has made a fair point, which I shall try to answer.

When we are dealing with Parliament, we are talking about the composition of one body. Giving the individual citizen a right to cast more than one vote means giving him or her a disproportionate weight in terms of the composition of, say, the House of Commons. That is why we argue for only one vote in parliamentary elections. The same principle would apply to the granting of more than one vote to an individual elector in regard to the composition of one local government area: undue influence would be conferred. That is probably why we did away with the business vote, as well as what would then have been the ratepayer's vote. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) made a valid point about that. In this instance, however, we are dealing with another issue—the composition of different local authorities. The local government elector can have only one vote in respect of each authority; he therefore does not have a disproportionate say in the composition of that authority.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): In a sense, I am reluctant to prolong this discussion, but has it occurred to my right hon. and learned Friend that a disadvantage of the arrangement proposed by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) in respect of local government is the fact that local elections take place in different ways in different years in different parts of the country? It is highly likely that someone with two or three residences could change his main residence to ensure that it was in the right place for the purpose of the current local election.

Mr. Hogg: I am sure that that is factually correct. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the ingenuity of his conclusion, which had not occurred to me.

I must end my speech, which has only been prolonged by interventions—although I do not grumble about interventions that were entirely serious. Let me finally say

that it is wrong to deprive an individual of a vote in respect of the composition of an authority that taxes him and regulates his activities. I hope that we shall not change the present law in so far as it relates to local government elections.

Mr. Linton: I urge the Government to support amendment No. 33, which suggests that a person should be able to register to vote in parliamentary elections in the constituency that contains his or her sole or main residence. I cannot speak to the amendment that I tabled, because it is starred, but it is couched in similar terms, suggesting that a person should be registered to vote in parliamentary elections only in the constituency that contains his or her principal residence. It bears no relation to what the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said about local government, and does not impinge on the amendment relating to registration for local elections.

I am speaking in pursuance of a recommendation by the Home Affairs Committee, and also because I feel that the perfect amendment to a Representation of the People Bill, from the Government's point of view, would have cross-party support, and would deal with an anomaly in the law that was not created by the present legislature, but has appeared for other reasons. This amendment falls into that category. Certainly, it deals with an anomaly in the law.

People speak as though dual registration had always existed. In a few cases that may be true, but it has existed to any real extent only since the 1970s. Very few students voted until the 1970 general election—although I seem to remember voting in the 1966 election, which happened to occur during a university vacation. At that time, however, few students tried to "double register", because few were of what was then voting age. Only in 1970 was the issue tested—in a case called Fox *v.* Stirk, the outcome of which confirmed that people could register to vote in parliamentary elections in two constituencies. Before that, the position was uncertain.

As a result, it had to be spelt out in the Representation of the People Act 1983 that it was illegal to vote in two constituencies in parliamentary elections. It was not that anyone had believed before that it was legal; the situation simply had not arisen, because it was assumed that people registered their principal residence in any one constituency. The matter really became an issue because of the lowering of the voting age.

When he made his ruling, Lord Denning said:

"The first principle is that a man can have two residences. He can have a flat in London and a house in the country."

I think that Lord Denning was thinking mainly of people like the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, who was used to having two residences even before the lowering of the voting age. There may have been cases before the 1970s of people who registered in their London house and their country house, but the main reason why the provision was spelled out in the law was that it was regarded as a new phenomenon and the law had to make it explicit that double voting was illegal.

It is an anomaly that people can register in two constituencies. It was never intended by Parliament and has never been passed in a Representation of the People Bill. The anomaly emerged because people started to do it and the law held that it was not illegal.

At the same time, a case in Scotland—the name escapes me; I think that it was called Phillips—came to the opposite conclusion that a voter should register only in the constituency of his or her principal residence. Many Scots are under the impression to this day that they are not allowed to double register. In fact, that is probably not true, because Fox *v.* Stirk was heard in a higher court and therefore takes precedence. The Scottish law's answer was that people could not be double registered and the English law's was that they could. Both legal rulings had nothing to do with the intention of Parliament.

There is cross-party support on the issue. The Home Affairs Committee heard evidence from representatives of the three main parties, all of whom made it clear that they would like an end to dual registration. Chief among those giving evidence was the then chairman of the Conservative party, Lord Parkinson, who said that students and second-home owners should nominate their principal place of residence. He clearly opposed the two main kinds of dual registration.

8.30 pm

Mr. Robathan: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman with interest. I had understood that the purpose of the Bill was to make it easier to vote. That seems to be the idea behind the rolling register and other proposals. The Minister is nodding. If I were a university student and had nominated the university as my place of residence but was at home when the election was called, I would have to get a postal vote. We all know that postal votes are not the easiest way of voting, and that the Government want to make it easier to vote. How will people be encouraged to vote if they cannot register in both the places where they live during part of the year?

Mr. Linton: This is a good time to correct the anomaly because the Bill's main proposals, which I applaud, are a rolling register and postal voting on demand. Those provisions will make it much easier for students who live in two places to vote in elections. It is difficult at the moment. Students who are registered in only one constituency do not have much time after an election is called to apply for a postal vote. They cannot apply for a permanent postal vote. They have to apply at each election. In 1974, for example, students had only a few days to apply for a postal vote to ensure that they could register their vote in the other constituency.

The Bill will introduce postal voting on demand. It will be possible to have a permanent postal vote for any reason. Students who live in two places will find it the easiest thing in the world to get a postal vote in the other constituency. It will be open to students to decide which constituency to register in, because they will still have a claim of residence in both. The amendment would merely force them to choose which should be their principal residence where they want to be on the parliamentary register. In the current circumstances, the amendment might lead to more difficulty, but, given the other proposals in the Bill, voting would not be more difficult.

Mr. Robathan: Voting will be easy in theory. The hon. Gentleman came to the House in 1997. In my limited experience, postal votes are not a panacea, because the whole business is very complicated. Postal votes sometimes do not arrive. The hon. Gentleman is wrong to

[Mr. Robathan]

say that it would be easier for students to vote. I think that fewer people would vote, not more. We are trying to encourage more people to vote.

Mr. Linton: Yes indeed, but the Bill will make it much easier for people to get postal votes. There will also be pilots in other voting systems, which could allow students, or anybody else, to vote in any post office, library or town hall anywhere in the country and have their vote registered in their home constituency. Distant voting will no longer be difficult. I cannot predict how successful the pilots will be or how soon they will be rolled out across the country, but I have every confidence that the Bill will ensure that it is no longer difficult to vote from another part of the country. On Second Reading, I cited the example of Sweden, where it is possible to vote at any post office in the country until 5 pm on election day and have the vote transferred to one's local polling station by the close of the polls at 8 pm. There is no reason why we cannot introduce such a system under the Bill, taking all the pain out of postal voting.

The Liberal Democrat representative told the Select Committee:

"I can see why they"—

students—

"should be able to vote in either place in local elections"—

and that takes up the point made by Conservative Members. He continued:

"I do not think they should have a right to choose though which of those two giving them the entitlement to vote in Parliamentary elections."

In other words, in parliamentary elections, there should not be dual registration even if it is permitted for local elections.

The Labour party representative said:

"Certainly in Parliamentary and European elections it would be better if people when they sign their declaration say this is their main or principal residence".

Whatever may be the case with local elections, at parliamentary level, all three parties support an end to dual registration.

The Home Affairs Committee recommended that there should be an end to dual registration in parliamentary elections and said that people should be required to specify their main residence. That recommendation was misinterpreted by the Home Office working party on election procedure, which studied all these issues before they were put in the Bill. That working party read it as a requirement for people to make a declaration about the constituency of their principal residence, as if they had to sign a form when registering to vote. The working group concluded that it would be complex to administer and would discourage, rather than encourage, voting.

That is making far more of the proposal than was intended. Without dual registration, it would be perfectly simple for people to register only once for parliamentary elections but to register twice for local elections. That is perfectly possible now. European nationals and Members of the House of Lords can register for local and European elections. Their electoral number is usually appended with a G, a K or an L in the electoral register. It is an accepted device now, and this change in the law would mean that, as a parliamentary elector, one could register only once while continuing to register twice for local elections.

The next test of the amendment is whether the law as it stands creates any mischief. I argue that it does. There is a clear advantage to people who have the option of dual registration in that they can cast their vote in the more marginal seat. That point was made strongly in evidence to the Home Affairs Committee by one of the academics. He said:

"persons registered in two or more constituencies may prefer to cast their vote in the constituency which is more marginal and therefore where their vote is more likely to prove of political impact to the result."

We know from experience that those who are dual registered cast their votes in a tactical way, giving them an advantage possessed by nobody else. The academic continued that a choice of constituency in general elections applies most commonly to our more affluent citizens by virtue of their ownership of two or more houses and said:

"It would be preferable to remove this element of electoral chicanery which has systematically favoured the better-off."

I do not know how true it is that double registration helps the more affluent, but I am sure that we all agree that it does confer an unfair advantage on some people who can choose to vote in the constituency in which their vote makes more difference.

The Home Affairs Committee identified two groups who benefit from dual registration and said that constituencies that can be influenced by dual registration are those with large student populations and a large number of second homes. The Committee's report said that in probably very few constituencies was the result influenced by the votes of double-registered voters. However, I am not sure that we were right on that. The student vote is substantial in many constituencies, and the election date is essentially a lottery for candidates in those constituencies, many of whom wait to discover whether students will be able to vote at university or, in the vacation, at home. Under the new system, although students will still have the choice of registering at their university or home address, they will have to make that choice in advance, rather than tactically at the election.

I urge the Government to accept this group of amendments. There is cross-party support for change in the law. The anomaly was never intended by Parliament; it has simply developed, and is unfair electorally.

Mr. Simon Hughes: There are several propositions: the first is on choosing representation at parliamentary elections; the second is on choosing representation at local government elections; and the third is on registration for both types of elections.

On the first proposition, and for reasons that have already been elucidated, Liberal Democrat Members are minded to support amendment No. 30. In parliamentary elections, everyone should have one vote, and everyone's vote should have equal worth. The Government are to be congratulated for ensuring that "everybody" now encompasses more people—including those without permanent places of residence, such as those who are homeless, in mental hospitals or on remand.

Everyone has one place to which they are more closely tied. If people have more than one place of residence, they are entitled to choose where to vote. Therefore, some

people have the advantage of deciding where their vote might be more useful. As long as we have a constituency-based system—regardless of whether it is first past the post or multi-member—those people will have an additional advantage.

The advantage is as available to students—it was when I was a student—as it is to hon. Members. Some hon. Members live in my constituency. Until recently, the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) lived there; I do not know whether he still does. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) lives in my constituency, as does the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). If they thought that they had a safe seat and decided not to vote in their constituency, they could vote in the constituency in which their parliamentary residence is located, perhaps affecting the outcome in a less-safe seat. It is terribly wrong—*[Interruption.]* I shall not embarrass the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham by saying how he voted.

Mr. Hogg: I vote for my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh).

Mr. Hughes: It is terribly wrong to give people an additional advantage. Moreover, as the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) said, that advantage is the result of an anomaly. When I was a student, I remember being aware that I had the choice of where to vote, and I exercised that choice by being on the register in the place where I could most intelligently use my vote.

Current electoral law is the aspect that baffles us all. The most recent electoral form, and previous ones, sent to me asked me to state where I resided on the relevant date, which was 10 October. One certainly cannot reside at more than one place on one date. Does the Minister think that it should be possible for people to register in more than one place?

Both the electoral form and the law state that, by signing a form in one place, one is declaring that that place is one's normal or regular place of residence. It is probably not proper for people to fill in forms in two places—although it is commonly accepted that, if one has two homes, one probably is able to fill in two forms.

8.45 pm

Thirdly, there are different arguments about local elections. Although they are not conclusive, there are arguments to suggest that, because one is electing the administration for local government services for that area, one should have a vote in more than one area if one can register. The elections are at different times. Theoretically, they are different elections. Also, one is contributing in each area. That argument is difficult to sustain because it was the argument for the old business rate—one contributed and, therefore, one got a business vote. Although that parallel exists, it cannot be put in the same frame as local government and parliamentary elections.

There is a strong case for saying that, if my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), for example, has a London and a Somerset residence, is entitled to fill in the form for both—he has simply to fill in a form to say that he is resident in both, not that he has a principal, main or sole residence—and has a council tax obligation in both, as one would have if one had two homes but no more than, he should be entitled to vote in both places.

Mr. David Heath: I do not register both for my address in the east end and for that in Somerton and Frome because I read the form and I understand the wording of the Representation of the People Act 1983, which states that one is required to be resident on the qualifying date. I take it that the normal meaning of those words is that I can be living only at one place on that date. That is why I am mystified by the state of the present law.

Mr. Hughes: Clearly, the rolling register would allow people to move their vote. The easier that that is, the better, but it is not the complete answer. Will a student who is based at the family home in the holiday and at college or university in term time think about changing the vote from one place to the other? I realise that people could do so and that the theory of the system is that they will, but I am not persuaded that it will necessarily follow that people will think, "There is an election. I am on the list in Caithness and I want to transfer to London," and that they will re-register.

We should be clear about the first principle on parliamentary elections and sort out the law, as the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire suggests. However, we should be more careful about the second, because local government elections raise different issues. As a precondition to our conclusions, the Minister will help us all if he can confirm—as my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome prompted him to do—what the law is at present. If it is meant to be that one can register only in one place, the sooner that that happens, the better.

Mr. Grieve: I do not want to take up much time and I endorse the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), in particular those on local government elections and the consequences of the amendments on people's ability to vote in those elections when they have a clear interest in the outcome. Those arguments were also endorsed by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

The problem goes further, and I shall concentrate on the way in which it concerns parliamentary elections. The hon. Gentleman hit the nail on the head. He was the first person to introduce into the debate the notion of parliamentary representation and what it is about. That is where the dividing line appears between the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), myself and, I suspect, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham.

To have a first-past-the-post system and, above all, to ensure community representation, we have to tolerate a substantial number of anomalies that derogate from the principle that everyone's vote is equal. It is apparent that constituency sizes vary. One person's vote in a constituency with a small electorate carries proportionately more weight than that of a person in a constituency with a larger electorate. We accept that for two reasons. The first is because we want the first-past-the-post system. I know that views differ, but I think that the majority of hon. Members believe that that is essential. Secondly, we believe that people should be involved in their local communities and should elect their local community

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representative. I know that, in reality, it is often a question of choosing between parties, but the link between the Member of Parliament and his constituency is considered important. The link between the elector and his involvement in the local community is also considered important.

With those principles in mind, I do not find the idea of someone being entitled to choose where he casts his vote, because he happens to have an involvement in two locations, at all difficult. I accept that he should not be able to exercise a vote in two places at once, but, provided that he makes his choice, I cannot see the problem. Indeed, there is much to be commended.

University students often get as involved in their local communities as in studying. They should be encouraged to choose whether they vote where their university is, or at home. Those who have two residences, whether for pleasure or business, are often involved in both communities. They, too, should be entitled to that choice, and I do not follow the arguments of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire that it is in the interests of parliamentary democracy for that choice to be removed.

Mr. Barnes: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that my proposals would in no way limit the choice to decide where someone should be registered? People with a number of residences can choose which they consider to be their sole or main place of residence. There would be no problem about choice under my proposed system. People would put down one place and, if they decided to move because the influence in their life had changed, they could register elsewhere and have their name deleted.

Mr. Grieve: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and I disagree with him. First, I do not believe that the rolling register would be able to cope with the number of variables that would be introduced if people constantly announced to the electoral registration office that they were changing location.

Secondly, I do not see why people should not be entitled to make their choice at a by-election and say, "It is my good fortune that I happen to have business interests in another part of the country and I have a residence there. I will be able to contribute to the election of the local candidate, even though at the general election I would prefer to vote at another location where I have another residence."

Finally, I have never understood residence to be a sole or exclusive concept. It is perfectly possible to reside in two places at once. After all, on the electoral registration day, people may be in one of their homes in the morning and somewhere else in the afternoon, or in a hotel that is outside either place. I see no difficulty in that, but I shall be interested to hear the Minister's comments.

I would leave well alone. The arrangements contribute to the variety of participation. An issue that has been raised time and again in this House recently is the diminution of participation in the electoral process. This proposal would be another nail in the coffin of participation. I do not think that what we have causes distortions that should create anxiety for individuals.

Mr. Linton: The hon. Gentleman asked why students should not have a choice in where they cast their vote. Lord Parkinson, when chairman of the Conservative party, said to the Select Committee on Home Affairs:

> "Students should nominate their principle place of residence in particular because they are birds of passage and they can elect the Member and not be there for more than a few months after he has been elected."

Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Mr. Grieve: No, I do not agree, and I will tell the hon. Gentleman why. In Kensington and Chelsea, where there has recently been a by-election, I think that some 30 per cent. of the electorate changes annually. It is an enormous percentage, but I cannot remember the precise figure. Is it to be said that people are to be deprived of the vote because it so happens that they will be moving house subsequently?

Mr. Linton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Grieve: No. I must bring my speech to an end.

I disagree with the reasoning of the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire. I would leave the matter well alone. It helps our democratic process.

Mr. Greenway: The comment of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) provokes me to say that at general elections I vote for myself. I dare say that most right hon. and hon. Members do the same. At the 1992 general election, a good personal friend of mine who is a member of my party confessed to me at the count that he had not voted for me. It was a practical joke. When I went a whiter shade of pale he added, "Because I voted for Mr. Dudley Fishburn in Kensington."

It has become an accepted part of our electoral arrangements for parliamentary elections that people can be registered to vote in two different places, but that they must vote only in one of those places. If there is an issue for the Committee in tonight's debate, it is whether we should strengthen the Bill or clarify its provisions to ensure that the law that states that one can vote only once in a parliamentary election is more strictly monitored and enforced. I hope that the Minister will give some thought to that.

If I may be provocative myself, I suggest that it is really time, after almost five hours of debate, for us to get down to debating some of the issues pertaining to what is in the Bill rather than to what right hon. and hon. Members think ought to have been put in the Bill in the first place.

By way of a preface to the way in which we shall approach this Committee stage, I want to say that all the amendments that have been tabled in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends have the express purpose of improving, clarifying or strengthening the provisions in the Bill on which there is consensus. We had our partisan arguments on Second Reading and I dare say that when we come to Report there may be some further partisan arguments, but our purpose in the Committee is to promote ideas that we believe will clarify, improve or strengthen the Bill.

There is an important double registration issue for the Committee. We will deal with it chiefly when we consider clause 6, but the structure of the Bill means that we need to consider whether changes are appropriate to clause 1. Five amendments in the group—amendments Nos. 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14—deal with the double registration issue. We are pleased to see that the Government have clarified their position, especially on the declaration of local connection.

The Bill does not make it clear whether a person can have more than one current local connection declaration at any one time, but I see that the Government have tabled amendments Nos. 56 and 57 to clause 6 to clarify the issue and make it abundantly clear that there can be only one local declaration at any one time.

9 pm

More important than that, I understand that if a person whose name is included on an electoral register through a local declaration is subsequently registered in the normal way, the Government's intention is that the local declaration registration should be void. In other words, if the person acquires a permanent residence—within that, or another, constituency—the local declaration would fall, as he would now be properly registered because he had a residence and a permanent address. I realise that I am straying somewhat from clause 1 by making that point, but it has an important bearing on the Conservative amendments in the group—amendment No. 14 also relates to clause 6.

The Government amendments seem to offer only a halfway house. If I have correctly understood the matter, once a person is properly registered, a local declaration registration would fall. However, it is not clear whether someone who is already on a register, by virtue of having a permanent address, can subsequently make a local declaration. That is why we have tabled amendments Nos. 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14. They would ensure that people who make a local connection declaration must inform the electoral registration officer if they are already registered elsewhere. In such cases, it would be sensible not only to remove people from one of the registers, but to ensure that there is effective cross-reference between electoral registration officers.

Although the wording of our amendments might be improved, I ask the Minister to give some thought to the matter in his winding-up speech. We need to clarify the position of a person who is on the electoral register in a part of the country from which he has moved. An example might be a person in his late teens or early 20s who lives at home with his parents and is included on the electoral register because his dad filled in the form. The person might then leave home to go into digs—perhaps as a student. He might fall on hard times, become homeless and live in some local hostel. He could thus take advantage of the local declaration so as to register in the constituency where he is living—albeit as, in effect, a homeless person.

It would be inappropriate for people to be disfranchised, with no prospect of voting in the area in which they live, simply because their names were on an electoral register somewhere else. However, if people are already registered, they should declare it, so that the earlier registration can be nullified.

Mr. Linton: Does the hon. Gentleman suggest that, under amendment No. 10, people who have to make a local declaration of residence because they are homeless—because they sleep in a shop doorway—should be removed from the register in the place where they lived previously, while people who have a flat in town and a house in the country should continue to enjoy the benefit of double registration? I am rather alarmed that he should hold those apparently contradictory views, especially since the Conservative party and Conservative members of the Home Affairs Committee were in favour of an end to dual—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is far too long.

Mr. Greenway: My views are not contradictory. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—through nods and winks—clearly acknowledges that the Government's intention is that there should be only one declaration of local connection and that, if someone is added to an electoral register, any such declaration would be nullified. I am sure that the House would recognise that that is a realistic and reasonable position.

The hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) asked about people who have more than one residence, but he will see from amendments Nos. 10 and 12 that we also suggest that anyone who makes an application for registration, when he is going on the register in the normal way, should specify and declare whether he is on another register. We agree with the Select Committee on Home Affairs—I have read its views with care—that there is a problem with double registration. We do not want to prohibit the prospect of double registration, but we want electoral registration officers to be aware of those individuals who are on an electoral register in another constituency or who may be—this is unlikely, but technically possible—on the register twice in the same constituency in respect of the same address.

The Home Affairs Committee concluded that there is no way of checking whether the law is being properly upheld; it is clearly not being enforced. I am registered to vote in Ryedale in north Yorkshire and in Vauxhall by virtue of my home in Kennington. I am a public figure, so I suppose that it is not unreasonable to think that electoral registration officers may have twigged that I may be registered in both places—heaven forfend that any Member of the House would seek to vote twice in a parliamentary election. However, in the case of many thousands of others, it may not be obvious to an electoral registration officer that someone is on another register. Although we cannot in any way accept the suggestion of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) that people should be on only one parliamentary register, the Government should consider whether electoral registration officers should be aware of dual registration so that people are more confident that the registers are secure.

I wish to make two final points. First, we shall have a rolling register and not the annual register that we have been used to until now. We are happy to support the proposal for a rolling register, but it would be utterly chaotic—this prospect has been suggested in the debate—if people with two or three residences because of their work came on and off the register each time they moved from one part of the country to another. I am sure that the Minister would agree that, even with the best will in the

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world, we are a long way from having the information technology in place to enable such procedures to be encouraged or to be secure.

My second point relates to the introduction of the concept of local declaration. I assume that we shall debate this issue again on the next day the Committee sits, but it is vital that the new declaration procedure be secure and that any potential abuse be closed off. I take it from the fact that the Government have tabled amendments No. 56 and 57 that they recognise that that issue must be dealt with.

I suggest, however, that the Minister has only half answered the question. The way we read it is that people who are on a register by virtue of a local declaration will automatically have that registration nullified if they then come on to the register by normal means. However, other people will already be on the register by normal means and they should be required to declare that—whether they are on the register or not—when they apply for a declaration of local connection. Our amendments, or something similar, would help to deal with that issue. We hope that the Minister will take that on board.

Mr. George Howarth: As the Committee would have expected, my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who has—I repeat the point—an honourable and long tradition of raising concerns about the electoral system, has again raised an important issue. I am grateful to him for doing so. The issue is, I am sure, close to the hearts of many right hon. and hon. Members because many of us, as has been conceded, appear on the electoral register in our constituencies and in respect of our midweek residences in London.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) mentioned several hon. Members who lived in his constituency for a brief period. When I was first elected in 1986, I lived in that constituency, but I assure him that he did not get my support on any of the occasions when I was eligible to vote.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire has led us to have a reasonable debate. However, there are reasons why I cannot, on this occasion, support him.

Perhaps I should at this stage deal with one query that was raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey: whether, because of the wording of the form, people were allowed to be resident in more than one place.

Mr. Simon Hughes: On a particular day.

Mr. Howarth: On a particular day. The form asks whether the person is a resident on the relevant date, rather than if that person is physically present. The courts have ruled—the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) made the point—that it is possible to have more than one residence at the same time. On the basis of the courts' interpretation, on this occasion we have to accept that that is the case. The point that was raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey has thus been covered.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield gave a good example. One could wake up in the morning in one residence and go to bed in the evening in another. In my case, not that I intend to register there, this morning I woke up in the Belfast, East constituency and will go to bed, I hope at a reasonable hour, in the Cities of London and Westminster constituency. It would not be my intention, come a general election, to vote in either place.

Mr. Greenway: You will vote for yourself?

Mr. Howarth: Unfortunately, the Boundary Commission will deprive me of that opportunity, but I will, when the next election comes, God willing, vote for my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara).

Mr. David Heath: I am grateful to the Minister for explaining, but he has confused me still further. What he has described is specifically referred to in the Representation of the People Act 1983, which deals with people who work away from their principal residence. I have to ask him the question that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) raised with me: if he and I are resident in both places, are we committing an offence by not completing the register of electors for a flat in London—which so far I have not completed?

Mr. Howarth: The courts have made it clear that the hon. Gentleman is entitled, if he so wishes, to register in both places, but it does not necessarily follow that, by not registering in both, he is committing an offence.

Mr. Hogg: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I will, if the right hon. and learned Gentleman will let me finish my point.

I stand to be corrected, but I am not aware of any case law that supports the point that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) is making—that, by not registering in both residences, he would be in breach of the law. The courts have made it clear that he would be eligible to register in both places of residence.

9.15 pm

Mr. Hogg: Although it is possible that the Minister's response to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) is correct, is it not true that the hon. Gentleman, as occupier, is under an obligation to complete the form that is delivered to him, if only because other people may live in the residence occupied by him and because, if he did not complete the form, those third parties would be deprived of their rights? Although the hon. Gentleman must fill out the form, whether or not he puts himself on it is a more debatable matter.

Mr. Linton: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Howarth: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall let him intervene later, after I have responded to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg).

The right hon. and learned Gentleman tempts me into areas into which I would be unwise to stray. His point that there is an obligation to fill in the form is a good one, but I fear that, if I were to go into the detail of the domestic arrangements enjoyed by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome in his constituency and in London,

the Chairman would say that I was straying from the point. I shall therefore not develop those arguments further.

Double registration, which the amendment would outlaw, is a sensitive issue. On the one hand, the principle of one person, one vote, which lies at the heart of our democratic system, suggests that no one should appear on the electoral register more than once. Therein lies the strength of the arguments advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire in support of his amendment. However, on the other hand, there are many people—notably but not exclusively students—who genuinely divide their time between two places.

Perhaps because the issue is so sensitive, it has been thoroughly discussed and considered more than once in recent years. In its report "Electoral Law and Administration", published last year and mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), the Home Affairs Committee considered the question of double registration. Although it made one practical suggestion relating to those who have dual registrations, it deliberately did not recommend that the practice of double registration should be prohibited.

The working party on electoral procedures, which I chaired, went further. After considering the issue, we concluded that

"it would be unreasonable to deprive people properly registered in two places of the right to have a voice in electing a candidate to represent their interests on each of the local councils where they live."

So the choice is theirs. Even though I have lived in two local authority areas for 13 years, I have made it my practice to vote only in my own constituency. However, that is my choice. I do not believe that I, as a legislator, should deprive anyone else of the ability to make that choice.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I understand the Minister's argument. Will he tell the Committee his working party's conclusions in respect of parliamentary elections? That is more clearly an issue, and his working party's guidance would be welcome.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman draws my attention to an issue on which I intend to comment later.

The working party restated the principle that nobody should be able to vote twice in the same election. We recommended the retention of the prohibitions on double voting that amendments Nos. 30 and 32 would remove. Both the Home Affairs Committee, whose work my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea prayed in aid, and the working party proceeded on the basis of all-party consensus, and it would be wrong if we were to depart from that important principle.

It has been argued that legislators—Members of Parliament—should be extremely cautious about changing the basis on which people are eligible to vote, for the simple and proper reason that we might be the beneficiaries of such changes, depending on the way in which we make them. That is why as often as is possible it is important that we proceed on the basis of consensus. I worked hard as chairman of the working party to preserve that consensus and to make it an integral part of the proposals that we brought forward. For that main reason, I cannot invite the Committee to support the amendments.

I mentioned that the Home Affairs Committee had made one practical recommendation. It suggested that all those who appear on more than one electoral register should be required to specify at the time of registration which their main residence was and, accordingly, where they intended to vote in a general election.

I should perhaps explain why we have decided on balance not to go down that route. In large part—

Mr. Linton: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Howarth: I promised to give way to my hon. Friend, but I would like to finish my sentence before I do so.

The working party considered the suggestion carefully. Its conclusion was that a requirement for people to make an advance of declaration as to which constituency they intended to vote in would be

"complex to administer and could serve to discourage rather than encourage voting unless introduced flexibly to allow for late changes to the declared intended voting location. Such flexibility would of course largely negate any intended restraint on block tactical voting. We do not therefore consider it practical or desirable to introduce such a requirement."

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea quoted precisely that passage. Obviously it is incumbent upon me to hear how he wants briefly to develop that argument.

Mr. Linton: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an issue on which there was cross-party consensus, in that the representatives of all three major parties gave evidence precisely to the same effect to the Home Affairs Committee, and that all members of the Select Committee, of all three parties, came to the conclusion that there should be an end to dual registration? I know that the smaller parties that are represented in the House of Commons concurred with that view. I do not understand why at the last minute of the final hurdle the Opposition should have departed from the consensus. However, the consensus was already established both at the level of chairmen and general secretaries of parties—

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. That is far too long an intervention.

Mr. Howarth: When I gave way to my hon. Friend, for whom I harbour great affection, I said that I would do so briefly. I should have realised that my hon. Friend's definition of brevity is probably different from mine. However, he makes the point that I am arguing in favour of maximum consensus. He says that when the Home Affairs Committee considered this matter there was consensus. He referred to the then chairman of the Conservative party, Lord Parkinson, in that context. Subsequently, there was no such consensus on the working party which I chaired, and there is no such consensus in the Chamber tonight.

If my hon. Friend accepts the point that I made earlier, it would be wrong of the House of Commons to legislate on that basis. It would call our motives into question. Surely the last thing that we want is for the general public to view the proposed changes, which after all are designed to make voting easier, with suspicion. I know that my hon. Friend and others hold their views in a strong and

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principled way, but I hope that it will be recognised that there is a counter-balancing principle, which is that we should proceed with the maximum possible consensus.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Was the Minister's working party given evidence as to roughly the number of people who are registered in two places for parliamentary elections? What is the procedure for random checking or any other process to ensure that there is no abuse of that system?

Mr. Howarth: I cannot recall whether the detailed statistics that the hon. Gentleman requests were made available to us, but the principle was considered. As I understand it, no systematic checks are carried out to establish the incidence of double voting. The responsibility lies with each returning officer and electoral registration officer to make such checks as they consider appropriate. In practice, I imagine that such checks are carried out only when there is reason for suspicion. That is probably appropriate.

I do not believe that there is evidence of widespread systematic abuse. We would not want to suggest that the integrity of our electoral system was such that random checks were warranted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea said, with the introduction of further technology, such checks may become simple to perform, but at present they are not.

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle-under-Lyme): Was the registration of university students considered? I have a university in my constituency. The 6,000 or 7,000 students there do not register individually. There is a mass registration—as they come in, they are registered. That could be another stumbling block to the measure.

Mr. Howarth: I shall cover that point when I deal with amendments tabled by the Opposition, so if my hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall deal with her question later.

If we accepted the amendment moved by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire, it would run counter to the views of the working party on electoral procedures. On the basis of the consensus achieved there, I hope that my hon. Friend will withdraw his amendments.

I shall deal now with the amendments to which the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) spoke on behalf of the official Opposition. I am a little surprised by them. I do not mean that in an unhelpful way, but I assumed that the hon. Gentleman and his party, being familiar with electoral procedures, were of the same view as I am—that our procedures were in some ways cumbersome and old-fashioned, and that we should endeavour to make it easier for people to vote. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman said as much.

However, it is clear, although perhaps unintended, that the Opposition amendments would make it harder for people to put their names on the register. The amendments would place an additional burden on people registering as electors, whether they were registering in the usual way, or by means of a service declaration or a declaration of local connection.

Amendments Nos. 9 to 12 would create a requirement to provide details of all previous registration in the past 12 months. That would place a particular burden on the most mobile members of our society, who are already among those least likely to register. It would also be a particular nuisance for students who, as the House knows, may move several times during a year.

The electoral registration form would need to be redesigned and made much larger to contain all that information. I remember Opposition Members protesting vigorously about the size of the ballot paper when we discussed the European Parliamentary Elections Bill. I am sure that they would not want an unwieldy document for registration purposes.

On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) in an intervention, the House would have to consider how large a form would be necessary, for example, to cater for a house shared by six students, let alone an entire student hostel where mass registration takes place. It would be a difficult process.

9.30 pm

Although the amendments are well intentioned, they do not serve a useful purpose. The introduction of a rolling electoral register would enable people to change their registration during the course of a year. The form will require people to give details of their previous registration to prevent dual registration. Why is anything more required? Why does a registration officer need details of earlier registrations? What would the electoral registration officer be required to do with that information?

Mr. Greenway: I do not understand the Minister's point. In one breath, he claims that it is too cumbersome to ask people who apply to go on a register—it could now be a rolling register—to give details of other places where they are registered, yet he accepts that there will have to be a mechanism to enable a registered person to be put on a new register and removed from a previous register. How will that be done other than through a request for details of other current registrations?

Mr. Howarth: Individuals would simply make a declaration of where they intended to cast their vote in, for example, parliamentary elections. That does not require information about other places where they may be registered. The difference between the amount of information that the Opposition and the Government would require is considerable.

Mr. Greenway: I am sorry to intervene again, but can we agree on two points? First, does the Minister accept that rolling registration will create a greater prospect of people being on more than one register? We need a mechanism whereby their names are removed from previous registers. Secondly, will he deal with the issue of people who are already registered somewhere, but who seek to make a local declaration registration?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman makes a theoretical suggestion. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department will consider his point. Without prejudging my hon. Friend's consideration, I suspect that the hon. Gentleman's fears are unfounded. I am in a good position; as a visiting Minister, I can make commitments on behalf of hon. Friends without

necessarily having to follow them up. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend has now helpfully handed me a note, which states that he will write to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I shall give way for the last time; I need to make progress.

Mr. Hughes: I am prompted to intervene by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor), who asks another question to be passed to the Minister's left. Will the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department take evidence from places such as Cornwall, where the second home issue has caused problems over the years and where there is a widespread view that associated abuses have distorted the system? I do not expect the Under-Secretary to reply tonight, but I ask the Home Office to consider the problem and to invite Cornwall electoral registration officers to submit evidence.

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend suggested offstage that he would be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that issue. After every general election, the Home Office undertakes a review of any anomalies or difficulties in election procedures. Electoral registration officers in Cornwall and elsewhere can make use of that. I do not know whether they did that after the last general election, but methods of raising problems exist.

I hope that those who are not yet fully convinced of the force of my arguments will not believe it necessary to divide the Committee. Doubtless my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire, who is a doughty campaigner, will continue to raise registration matters, and, in due course, he may even persuade us of the merits of his argument. I fear, however, that we are not far along that road tonight.

Mr. Barnes: I had support in the debate for certain amendments, especially for ending double registration for parliamentary elections. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) supported those provisions, but—unfortunately for me—my suggestions for changes to local government elections are part and parcel of the whole package of arguments that I am making. I have yet to convince those hon. Members who gave me partial support that they need to go somewhat further.

I am a bit disturbed by the response of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) to my arguments. He claimed that I am in some way attempting to restrict electoral registration rights, but I have argued for years in the House about the need to advance electoral registration provisions. In the next debate, he may think that I want to restrict those rights further by eliminating overseas votes. The Bill goes part way to starting to place the missing millions on the electoral registers and I assure him that if he looks at the balance of numbers, the arguments and the evidence—for instance, that which I gave to the Home Affairs Committee when it was producing its report—he will see that there are good, solid arguments for my amendments, which would considerably improve electoral registration in this country. We need a modern, up-to-date rolling register rather than the limited version suggested by the Government.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) claimed that my amendments were in some way improper compared with his own, which he said related to the Bill, but that is obviously not the case. My amendments would not have been selected if they had anything improper about them and they are highly germane to the provisions before the Committee. He is concerned about the problem of double registration of homeless people. I am concerned generally about the problem of double registration, which I referred to in connection with people's residences. He was in danger of supporting double registration for toffs, but objecting to it for down and outs. That position is not viable. My position is that I am against double registration across the board. His amendments would be much more appropriate if they were combined with my package of amendments. I should perhaps have given further thought to the people he is concerned about, but he stands alone on the platform in respect of his position on registration of the homeless.

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman and some of his hon. Friends, including the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), are missing the point completely. The argument for making a declaration of local connection is to enable people to vote who otherwise would have no right to do so because they have no permanent residence. It must follow that if they make such a declaration to enable them to vote they should not be on any other register.

Mr. Barnes: That point is reasonable, especially if it is related generally to the overall problem of double registration. It would have been possible, therefore, to table different amendments that relied on the same principle, but tied my position to the declaration of local connection and the knock-on consequences.

Many other amendments form part of my argument for getting the missing millions on to the electoral registers and the measure before the Committee is part of that process. It is not appropriate for me to go into the detail of later amendments at this stage. The problem with Committee procedures is that amendments must be considered in relation to specific clauses. My arguments about the issuing of polling cards and the need for publicity tie in with the general structure that I am advocating.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said that he used to have a flat in the constituency of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. It was above my flat. The difference between us was that he placed himself on the electoral register and I did not. I took the attitude that was expressed earlier. Am I legally obliged to put myself on the electoral register, or is it sufficient to fill in a form as the sole occupant pointing out that I am not entitled to registration? Would I face a £1,000 fine for not registering?

The Under-Secretary claimed that the system was established with all-party consensus. That consensus was broken because the Liberal Democrats were willing to support my amendments Nos. 30 and 33 on parliamentary elections. This is an on-going argument. The Government will introduce legislation later that will establish an electoral commission, which will make recommendations to the House. I am happy that the arguments put in this debate will continue. We may come back to the issue, especially if other Government measures involve greater

[Mr. Barnes]

expenditure on electoral registration than those in the Bill. The Bill makes provision for expenditure by local authorities, but does little about the operation of a central roll, which will have to be addressed by an electoral commission. Some of these measures may become more appropriate at that stage.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Kaufman: I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 2, line 44, leave out from "elector" to end of line 2 on page 3.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 2, in clause 8, page 10, line 11, leave out ", 2".

No. 3, in page 10, line 14, leave out from beginning to "and" in line 15.

No. 4, in schedule 1, page 19, line 28, leave out from "declarations" to end of line 29.

No. 5, in page 26, leave out lines 28 to 31.

No. 47, in schedule 2, page 27, line 33, leave out "20" and insert "5".

No. 48, in page 27, line 33, leave out "20" and insert "10".

No. 49, in page 27, line 42, leave out "20" and insert "5".

No. 50, in page 27, line 42, leave out "20" and insert "10".

No. 82, in page 28, line 2, at end insert—

"(4A) The third set of conditions is that—

(a) he was included in a register of parliamentary electors in respect of an address at a place that is situated within the constituency concerned,

(b) that entry in the register was made on the basis that he was resident, or to be treated for the purposes of registration as resident, at that address, and

(c) he either, prior to ceasing to be a resident of the United Kingdom, signed a declaration stating an intention to return to the United Kingdom to live within ten years of departure, or, alternatively, he continues to pay income tax annually in the United Kingdom.".

No. 51, in page 30, line 23, leave out "20" and insert "5".

No. 52, in page 30, line 23, leave out "20" and insert "10".

No. 53, in page 30, line 32, leave out "20" and insert "5".

No. 54, in page 30, line 32, leave out "20" and insert "10".

Schedule 2 stand part.

No. 7, in schedule 4, page 34, leave out lines 52 and 53.

No. 8, in page 35, line 19, leave out from "connection" to end of line 20.

New clause 1—*British citizens overseas*—

".—(1) Sections 1 to 4 and subsections (1) and (2) of section 12 of the Representation of the People Act 1985, as amended by the Representation of the People Act 1989, are hereby repealed.

(2) In section 3C of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978 (as inserted by the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999), in subsection (2), paragraph (b) and the word 'or' at the end of paragraph (a) shall be omitted."

Mr. Kaufman: Listening to the debate on the previous group of amendments, it occurred to me that if the Opposition's requirement of a declaration of local connection were put into law there would be no need for me to move this amendment. It is an interesting fact that the Conservative party wants to place every obstacle in the way of homeless people being able to vote, whereas people living abroad as tax exiles who vote for a Government who create homelessness are not asked to provide any declaration of local connection.

The amendment would abolish the overseas vote in its entirety. The aim is to return the position to what it was before the Representation of the People Act 1985. It is an interesting coincidence that the Representation of the People Bill that became the Act of 1985 had its Second Reading on 10 December 1984, almost exactly 15 years ago tonight.

9.45 pm

On Second Reading, the Conservative party seemed to believe that those of us who were opposed to the overseas vote were using this provision to launch an attack on Michael Ashcroft. Mr. Ashcroft has simply hitch-hiked on to the provision in order to make donations to the Conservative party, and he can be left to his own devices, whatever they may be. I, however, have opposed the overseas vote since it was first mooted in the House. I argued against it in discussions with Leon Brittan when I was shadow Home Secretary; I opposed it in the debate on the White Paper in June 1984; I opposed it on Second Reading of the Bill in December 1984; and I opposed it in Committee in January 1985.

I have opposed the overseas vote for the same reasons that Conservative Members have adduced against the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). They say that there must be a local connection, that people must be part of the community, and that if they are part of the community they must have the right to vote. Yet they dragged through the House, opposed by the Labour party, a provision granting the vote to someone who for many years had had no connection with this country or any specific locality. What is more, the child of such a person, who had never even lived in this country, would be entitled to vote as an attainer. I have opposed this measure from the beginning, on the simple basis of no representation without taxation.

As I have said, my opposition dates back to the time when the overseas vote was first mooted. On 27 June 1984, the House debated the response of the then Conservative Government, in a White Paper, to a report from the Select Committee on Home Affairs. The Committee—it contained a substantial Conservative majority, because the Conservatives had a majority of 100 in the House—opposed the introduction of an overseas vote outright and unanimously. It said that such a vote could have far-reaching consequences, and ruled it out on practical grounds. It said that it might alter the whole character of British elections. It said:

"Such an increase in the overseas vote would to some extent alter the traditional relationship between candidates at general or local elections and the voters whose support they are seeking to enlist.

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Hitherto, in the great majority of cases, the candidate has been able both to speak directly to the elector either on the doorstep or in a public place and personally to ensure that his election literature is delivered to every household. Problems of communication could arise both between candidates and overseas voters at election time and, indeed, between Members and their constituents thereafter."

The Committee—a Conservative-dominated Select Committee—also said, in its unanimous report, that those who would be given this franchise forfeited their claim to participate in the country's affairs.

When I spoke from the then Opposition Front Bench, I supported the report of that Conservative-dominated Select Committee. I may as well quote from what I said in the House then, because it will save time and because—as I was better at these things then—it will be more eloquent. I said:

"These people to whom the Home Secretary proposes that the vote shall be given will not be living in the constituency where they will be able to claim the right to vote. They may never have voted in that constituency. While they lived there—they may have lived there for a short time only—they will have been a self-selected electorate. The vote will be exercisable not by a defined and finite group, as happens now, but by people who decide that they feel like having the vote".

It is an optional franchise. It is a criminal offence for those who live in this country not to fill in the form, but those who do not live in this country and qualify for the overseas vote can choose whether they want it. That is a strange attitude to the franchise.

I went on:

"Their use of the right will be a farce. They will not be able to meet their candidate, to question the candidate or be canvassed by someone calling on behalf of the candidate. They may not receive any election literature, and they may therefore know nothing of the candidate except his or her name and party."

I went on to point out that the proposals

"could make it possible for tax exiles to decide the taxes that are paid by people living and working in this country. Property speculators living abroad could decide what pension should be paid to people who have worked all their lives in this country."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 1984; Vol. 62, c. 1029-31.]

That was the situation when the Conservative Government proposed an overseas vote for people who had been out of the country for seven years. It applies in spades to the current 20-year limit and would have applied to the 25 years that they wanted to introduce before those on our Front Bench persuaded them to reduce that a little.

On Second Reading of the 1984 Bill, I advanced further reasons. I said:

"Under the Government's dotty proposals, not only former electors get the vote but former non-electors too. Children who left Britain at the age of 11 and have had no contact with this country since then will have the right to vote and to help to decide this country's future, which they may never return to share."

There are people who came on the register this year who have not been living in this country since 1978, yet they are able to participate in deciding who should govern the country.

I further argued:

"For citizens who live in the United Kingdom, registration for the franchise is obligatory and failure to register is an offence. For expatriates, registration is optional. . . . It is quite unacceptable that the votes of people who are sunning themselves in tropical climes should decide the heating allowances of pensioners shivering in Britain in the cold of winter."—[*Official Report*, 10 December 1984; Vol. 69, c. 766-68.]

Our party's record has been clear from the start. It has assented to the idea only through force majeure and done its best on both Bills—the first introduced the overseas vote and the second expanded it—to limit the provision.

In Committee, I said that under our constituency system

"a person votes not for a Government but for a Member of Parliament to represent him or her. An overseas voter who has not lived in the constituency in which he or she has a right to vote will not be in direct contact with the issues and problems of the constituency. As a parent, he will not have experienced the education system or been able to campaign about school closures. As a sick person he will not have used the National Health Service, been in hospital or been able to form an opinion about health provision. As a driver, he will not have used the roads or public transport and, therefore, cannot know about those issues. He will not have been a householder who has paid rates and, therefore cannot have an opinion about local government finance policy".

Some hon. Members want people to have several votes in local election for those reasons.

I went on:

"Such a person will not have been able to play a direct part in the affairs of the constituency, even so limited a part as signing a petition, or the major part of being active in a political party, residents association, ratepayers association, the women's voluntary service, the scouts, ex-service men's associations, or any of the organisations that make up the web of community that exists in Britain and in which those who live outside the country cannot participate."

I went on further:

"What makes this franchise fancier than any other fancy franchise that we have had for a long time—certainly since the abolition of the university vote—is that it is based not on residence but on option."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 1985; Vol. 72, c. 191-93.]

Every argument that Conservative Members advanced against my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire because of the local connection is totally traduced by the measure they introduced. I concluded that the Opposition were totally opposed to the measure. That is how the Labour party stood 15 years ago and that is what I am advocating that the Labour party should return to now that it is, happily, back in government.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I understand the logic of the right hon. Gentleman's argument and I do not want to associate myself with the arguments deployed against it by the previous Conservative Government. However, what would he say to my older brother—this is a real example—who was living in Herefordshire and given a job by Barclays International, for which he worked, which required him to go abroad for an uncertain period? He is married to a woman working for the British services in Cyprus. He always intended to come home and did so as soon as he was able. He retained as many links with, and interests in, the British political process as was possible during his time abroad, which was fewer than 10 years but more than none. Surely he should have been allowed to continue to take part in decisions affecting the country in which he had paid taxes, in which he continued to have a financial interest and to which he has returned to pay taxes and contribute fully.

Mr. Kaufman: The franchise in this country is based purely and simply on residential qualification. We have debated this in our consideration of amendments moved by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire. I am sorry about the misfortune that might afflict the hon. Gentleman's brother, but when he

AVAILABLE

[Mr. Kaufman]

comes back, he can resume his vote. It is as simple as that. I do not see why anybody living for whatever reason in Kuwait, Nepal or Peru should be able to decide who governs the country in which they are not present at the time of a general election. Before this Bill there were all sorts of problems for those living in this country. There were problems with qualifying for a postal vote or a proxy vote. Hard decisions may be made, but the decision is much harder on a man living in Stanley grove who misses his vote because he falls ill after the closure of the postal vote than it is for the hon. Gentleman's brother, nice though I am sure he is.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I will proceed for a little longer. I am waiting to see how the Government intend to handle the timing. I am an obedient and subservient Back Bencher. If the Government continue the debate, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. If they do not, I will be caught short in my prime and will have to resume on another day.

My position on this is unequivocal and of long standing. Moreover, this fancy franchise is a flop. On Second Reading, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), who has sensibly made himself scarce, fantasised about a possible 3 million overseas voters. When the Conservative Government introduced the legislation in 1984, they forecast 800 overseas voters per constituency. That would have meant more than 500,000 people. The figure for this year is not 3 million or 500,000 but 13,677. That is an average of 21 overseas voters per constituency. The highest number of overseas votes in 1991 was 34,454, or 0.08 per cent. of the electorate. In 1990 it was 1,836. That figure was so small that the statistics counted it as 0.00 per cent. of the electorate.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Kaufman: If I am to give way to my hon. Friend, which I am happy to do, I must give way first to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant).

Mr. Fabricant: The right hon. Gentleman is ever gracious. I want to refer to the question raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). Surely, when someone is paying United Kingdom tax, as the hon. Gentleman described, and lives abroad—

It being Ten o'clock, THE CHAIRMAN *left the Chair to report progress and ask leave to sit again.*

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Committee report progress; to sit again tomorrow.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LEGAL AID AND ADVICE

That the draft Legal Aid (Prescribed Panels) (Amendment) Regulations 1999, which were laid before this House on 29th November, be approved.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Shout

10.1 pm

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): I wish to present a petition sponsored by Shout, which is an initiative of Big Take, a registered charity raising both awareness and funds to support specific projects aimed at providing education and training for children on the fringes of society. *[Interruption.]* The petition is signed by 134—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I remind the House that good manners are expected; the hon. Lady is presenting a petition to the House.

Mrs. Roe: The petition is signed by 134 of my constituents, and states:

The Petition of the people in Hoddesdon.

Declares that Her Majesty's Government has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and therefore has a responsibility to do all it can to help end the exploitation of child labourers in overseas countries.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons should urge the Secretary of State for International Development that all aid to countries such as Indonesia, India, Mali or Pakistan where child labour is known to be an extensive problem should have a reasonable percentage of the aid linked to a programme of education for the child labourers.

To lie upon the Table.

Farington (Pharmacy)

10.2 pm

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I present this petition on behalf of residents of the village of Farington, in my constituency, who are seeking a pharmacy within the village. The petition, which has more than 1,500 signatures, states:

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Health to review the regulations governing Health Authorities on the provision of pharmacies to allow South Lancashire Health Authority to allow a pharmacy to be established in Farington.

To lie upon the Table.

Child Sex Attacks

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

10.3 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): The Minister will know that, on 28 October 1999, I tabled a written question to the Home Secretary asking him if he would list by police authority area the number of women medical examiners available for examinations involving child victims of sex attacks, and whether, in all areas, child victims or their families are able to choose whether the child is examined by a female doctor.

The background to tabling the question was not simply a passing interest, but one of the most disturbing experiences that I have had as a Member of Parliament. A young mother came to see me at one of my advice surgeries and described the horrific circumstances in which it became apparent that her daughter had been the victim of rape and sexual attack since the age of six. The abuse had continued for more than five years before it became known and part of a police investigation and subsequent prosecution.

The details of the case are not really relevant to this Adjournment debate, but what troubled me was that, in the course of explaining what had happened, the mother took me through the exchanges with police; the very constructive and supportive help provided in the early stages of working through the traumas; and the explanation that, in a prosecution, it would be easier if her daughter could undergo a forensic medical examination, so that the evidence of the sexual attack could stand as the principal basis of the trial.

The mother talked the matter through with her daughter, who agreed to go through the process to minimise the inevitable trauma of having to give evidence in the trial. The real shock came when they discovered that the forensic medical examiner was a man, despite the fact that they had both asked for—and expected—a woman. Their shock was compounded by the fact that, when they asked whether they could have a female forensic medical examiner, they were told, "No." They were given that answer because there were no female examiners in Nottinghamshire.

I confess that I was shocked by the case. I do not consider myself to be particularly naive or sheltered, but I was unprepared for those statements, which showed how limited are the rights of the child in our judicial system as we approach the end of the 20th century. I was also unprepared as a father, brother, and partner—as close as a man can get to understanding how traumatic it is for a girl to be sexually attacked and abused—for the realisation that we still require girls to be medically examined by someone of the same gender as the person responsible for the attack.

I was slightly surprised at the response to my parliamentary question. The Minister will recall that, in his reply of 3 November, he said:

"Comprehensive information about numbers of female medical examiners is not held centrally. It is accepted as good practice that child victims of sexual assaults, or their families on their behalf, should be given the choice of being examined by a female doctor. Unfortunately, this cannot always be guaranteed as there are some police forces which do not have female medical examiners."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 194W.]

I was as surprised by the answer as by the statements that the Nottinghamshire police gave the family.

I could not understand why the Home Secretary was not in a position to provide me with that information on a national basis. I could not understand why Parliament cannot say how many areas of the country leave parents and child victims of sex assaults in a similar position, with no right to exercise a choice about the gender of the person who conducts the forensic medical examination. I also could not understand why it was not a priority for the Home Secretary to say not only that he did not know, but that it was unacceptable for him not to know and that he would find out.

In the absence of such an answer, the only way to proceed was to follow up the matter myself. I wrote to chief constables to ask about the provision in each police authority area. I asked them to detail the number of forensic medical examiners available to female or child victims of sex attacks and how many national health service general practitioners or paediatricians were in training with the police to provide the targeted examination service for women and children where they request it.

The replies that I received to my letter have also given me cause for concern. Some of the chief constables and their police forces have been extremely helpful, and I praise those who came back to me with full replies. Replies have been received from police forces in west Yorkshire, Cheshire, Kent, Cleveland, Surrey, Derbyshire, Merseyside, Avon and Somerset, Staffordshire, south Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. All gave full replies to my questions, but I suspect that one reason they were willing to do so was that, in each of those areas, positive and specific provision was available to women and children who were the victims of sex attacks. In those areas, anyone who requested to be examined by a female forensic medical examiner would have the right to be so examined.

A number of the other police forces that replied simply said that that was a matter into which the Association of Chief Police Officers was looking. Their response would not come to me direct but would go through ACPO. I pay tribute to ACPO's responsiveness and to those involved in the compilation of the inquiry. However, the information that has come back to me is somewhat patchy.

The national picture is as follows: some 18 per cent. of forensic medical examiners—sometimes referred to as police surgeons—are women. That is, by any standards, a fairly poor measure of the important role that must be fulfilled for child and women victims of sex attacks. However, the replies that came directly to me showed the better part of the picture. In many of the police authorities that replied, more than 18 per cent. of medical examiners were women.

Forces that did not have specific female provision did not bother to reply to me. Sadly, my own police authority in Nottinghamshire is included among that number—to date, it has provided me with no explanation about the absence of female forensic examiners in my county.

I am also uncertain whether, as a result of the ACPO survey, the Minister can come up with the more detailed information that I still do not have. I am appalled that the House and the Government do not regard the need to do something about the situation—and, at the very least, to know what is happening—as being of paramount importance.

[Mr. Alan Simpson]

I had helpful, if saddening, discussions with members of the women's centre in Nottingham, who provided phenomenal support for the family. The saddening aspect of those conversations was that they considered this problem almost a matter of course, and had had to live with and struggle against the problem for many years, with little or no public attention given to the plight of victims of sex attacks. They said that they regard this as the second of three rapes: the first rape is committed by the assailant; the second happens during the medical examination within the police investigation system; and the third is committed by the court.

I pay tribute to the Government for taking considerable steps to improve and protect victims of sex attacks in the way in which court proceedings are conducted. I understand that that has to be balanced against the conflicting rights of the accused, but I cannot for the life of me see what we have to balance in the medical investigation process within the police investigation against the demand that we recognise and respect the rights of the child. There are no contradictory pulls. It is simply a matter that baffles me as much as it offends me.

When I asked for explanations of why this should be so, the first and almost absurd reason given was that women did not like that sort of work. I am sure that there is not a single hon. Member who is not aware that a large number of women work in the health service as GPs or paediatricians in hospitals. There cannot be a shortage of qualified women doctors capable of doing forensic examinations.

On further inquiry, the position became a little clearer. The reply that I received from ACPO about the shortage of female doctors available was:

> "This is a constant problem, since many women Doctors who are willing to undertake this task are reluctant to become involved in other forensic medical work and it is essential that their level of expertise is sufficient to ensure the effectiveness both of the investigation and any subsequent prosecution."

I understand the importance of the fact that competence extends through to the prosecution process, but the real obstacle seems to be that women GPs who offer their services specifically for women and child victims of sex attacks are asked whether they are willing to undertake all other aspects of forensic examinations, such as those on bodies pulled out of ditches, found in canals or dragged out of car accidents, or in cases relating to the full range of responsibilities of the police.

It does not surprise me that those who specialise in paediatric care say that that is not what they are offering. They are offering their expertise in relation to children, their vulnerability and their right to be examined by someone who understands their plight, not necessarily someone who has competence across the board. The reason why we are in the current national predicament is partly of our own making. There is a dispute between the Home Office and the police forces about how forensic medical examiners are to be paid retainer fees. There is also a conflict in police culture about whether it is appropriate to allow women to offer a specific service rather than sign up to the full range of services that the police require.

At the end of the 20th century, a civilised society that has signed up to the European convention on the rights of the child and stands at the edge of a decade in which it is supposed to be a signatory to the international decade for the culture of peace for children, ought to have a different benchmark for the adequacy of our policies and procedures.

I have three specific requests to make to the Minister. First, will he complete and publish the national database of police returns on the number of female medical examiners in each police authority who are made available to respond to requests from women and children victims of sex attacks? Secondly, will he go back and look at the current ministerial guidelines, not to add a further recommendation about best practice but to define a non-negotiable statutory obligation for every police force in the land? It must be every child's right to request and to expect examination by a female doctor, should that be the child's choice.

Finally, during the Minister's negotiations with police forces, will he consider the introduction of measures to guarantee flexibility and training? We need to ensure that there is no distinction between those GPs who are retained and those who are not, and to acknowledge the importance of defining the obligation to provide special services to meet the needs of women and children victims of sex attacks.

We can never turn the clock back on the sex attacks that have taken place, but we ask the House and the Government to take this small step: to guarantee that we will listen to children's pleas not to repeat or compound the nightmare that they have lived through by requiring them to undergo medical examination by a doctor who is not of the gender of their choosing.

10.21 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) on securing the debate. I appreciate the way in which he made his points. As he acknowledged, and would expect me to point out, it is not appropriate or right for me to comment on a specific case which is before the courts. However, he raised an important and interesting question—as he did in the written question that I answered on 3 November—upon which he has elaborated in the debate.

The investigation of sexual attacks on children is an extremely important part of police activity, and it must be handled with the greatest care and sensitivity. The Government are determined to ensure that the criminal justice system is effective in protecting children from those who might harm them—that includes improving the way in which child witnesses are treated.

A key principle in dealing with children as victims or witnesses is to ensure effective partnership between the police and social services. Area child protection committees provide a framework in which that participation and partnership can take place. Parents and victims should themselves also be fully involved in the process wherever possible; their views and choices must be respected.

The partnership approach, which we established and formalised in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, is fully endorsed by the Government and is reflected in the work of police forces throughout England and Wales. It is on that basis that I deal with the issues raised by my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend is correct to say—I confirm it—that it is certainly good practice for child victims, or their parents on their behalf, to be offered a realistic choice of examination by a female police surgeon. In the second of his concluding points, he asked that ministerial guidelines be issued, which would require a statutory obligation to request and expect that children have that choice.

I understand, and appreciate, the legitimacy of my hon. Friend's demand, but he will realise that we can implement such a principle only when we are sure that it can be fulfilled. I shall refer later to the statistics and surveys that he mentioned. I am prepared to confirm that it is good practice for that choice to be offered, but I am not able to commit the Government to the introduction of ministerial guidelines that would require that to be the case. The demand is important, and I shall set out some of the ways in which we might deal with it effectively.

That good practice should be possible in the majority of cases, but some forces have no—or few—female police surgeons, as my hon. Friend pointed out. I shall refer to the data in a moment. In many cases, victims and their parents will feel happier about examination by a male police surgeon once they have had the opportunity to talk the issues through. In a sense, the most important factor is to ensure that the input from the police surgeon is high quality and sympathetic. Many examinations can be carried out by, or in partnership with, a paediatrician, who will often be female. However, none of those important qualifications invalidate the thrust of the point made by my hon. Friend. We shall consider that matter.

What is the national picture? The truth is that there have been difficulties in recruiting and retaining female police surgeons and there are a wide variety of reasons for that. Some relate to the unsocial hours, some to the working environment and some to the issue of breadth of experience that my hon. Friend mentioned. His third point on the guarantee of flexibility in training for different disciplines is important. As he said, many forces believe that all police surgeons should cover the whole range of issues that may arise. Establishing more flexibility may be worth considering in that regard, but it would require a significant change in practice in the police service across the country. The fact that my hon. Friend has raised the issue has put it sharply on the agenda.

I come to the figures to which my hon. Friend referred. The survey of the Association of Chief Police Officers, which was reinforced by his own research, revealed that many police forces have a high proportion of female police surgeons. For example, more than a third of the police surgeons in Bedfordshire, Surrey and Leicestershire are women. Some police forces have no female surgeons. The survey suggested that three forces had none; and 41 out of the 43 forces responded to it. However, as my hon. Friend pointed out, it showed that, across England and Wales, more than 17 per cent. of police surgeons are female. Therefore, it reveals a wide variety between police forces; some have a significant proportion of female police surgeons while others have very few or none. That was a fair point for him to make.

The first of my hon. Friend's final three questions was about the completion and publication of a national database. I shall consider his request in discussion with ACPO and others to see to what extent we can have a wider and more informed debate on the issue, which has been given greater profile by this debate. I understand why he wants more data, but he will understand that I am not able to answer yes or no to his question from the Dispatch Box. However, I assure him that I shall discuss with ACPO and the inspectorate whether it will be possible to publicise the data more fully and provide a comprehensive assessment.

As my hon. Friend said, each police force is operationally independent. Therefore, we as central Government do not have data that is universal across the whole country on a variety of issues about which there is general concern. For very good reason, we have been loth to publish partial data. That is why I have been qualified in response to my hon. Friend's question tonight and why I was qualified in my written answer on 3 November. However, I shall certainly consider with ACPO and the inspectorate whether we can provide more data in the way that he requests.

The central facts, however they are published, are as my hon. Friend set out. The general proportion of female surgeons in police forces across the country is 17 to 18 per cent. and that figure ranges from more than a third in some forces to zero in others. That is the picture and all that greater data will reveal is a clearer mapping of the proportion in each force.

My hon. Friend also referred to some broader issues. It is a fact that retaining female doctors has been very difficult for forces at a time when some of them have been struggling to maintain an effective overall police surgeon service. In some parts of the country, the right way to deal with that problem has been a major issue. There have been problems in achieving full geographical coverage and 24-hour availability, both of which are real demands; in providing the breadth of expertise that my hon. Friend mentioned; and with the total cost of the service. A small number of forces have gone as far as to contract out the service to the private sector.

Mr. Alan Simpson: Does my hon. Friend feel that it might be helpful if the questions that he goes away with after the debate include looking at those police authorities that have been able to ensure that over 30 per cent. of their police surgeons are women, how they have gone about doing that, how they have managed both to recruit and to retain those people, and whether there are models of good practice that other areas with no women police surgeons should be directed to follow?

Mr. Clarke: With the exception of one word in my hon. Friend's intervention, I completely agree. It is right to say that there is good practice to be learned, and to understand how recruitment procedures should operate. The one word is "directed" because, at the moment, the Home Secretary does not have the power to direct police forces on this and many other matters. We can offer guidelines, to which my hon. Friend has referred, but direction is not one of the powers.

I am probably alone in the House in watching "Dangerfield" from time to time, but we are talking about many of the issues that are raised on television evenings and weekends: flexibility, the difficulty of 24-hour availability and geographical cover. Those are the things that we see on our screens—the theatrical elements, each of which have important implications.

[Mr. Clarke]

The need to review at national level key issues of the type that have been raised by my hon. Friend was recognised by the establishment of the Home Office working group on police surgeons. That has proceeded relatively slowly over recent years, but I believe that it should report in the early part of next year. I give him the assurance that the substance of what he said not only in the question that I answered on 3 November, but in the debate, will be taken fully into account by the working group in its report, which we will then be able to discuss. Among the issues to be addressed are training, organisation and the arrangements for providing a service at force level. The issue that my hon. Friend has raised is, of course, important and substantial and needs to be addressed.

My hon. Friend mentioned pay. The establishment of new national arrangements to negotiate police surgeons' remuneration is a positive development.

There is a wide range of other issues, including how child witnesses should be treated, how examination should be conducted, how videos should be used, how the steering group can move matters forward and how victims of child abuse can be dealt with, but the central issue that my hon. Friend has raised—the availability of female police surgeons in forces throughout the country—is important.

Mr. Simpson *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I give way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order.

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at twenty-eight minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 16 December 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Working Families Tax Credit

1. **Mr. Derek Twigg** (Halton): How many people he estimates will be eligible for the working families tax credit in the north-west in the next 12 months. [101765]

8. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): How many people have contacted the working families tax credit response line in the east midlands. [101772]

9. **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside): What assessment he has made of the number of people benefiting from the working families tax credit in Liverpool, Riverside. [101773]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I understand, Madam Speaker, that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has informed you and the shadow Chancellor that he is at the G20 meeting in Berlin and therefore is not with us today. He is representing the Government at the Finance Ministers meeting.

It is estimated that in 2000–01—the first full year of the working families tax credit—about 200,000 families in the north-west will be in receipt of the credit.

The response line for the working families tax credit and disabled person's tax credit had handled 780,000 inquiries nationally up to 30 November. In the Central and Anglia TV regions, the response lines have handled about 162,000 calls. A more detailed breakdown is not available.

Reliable estimates for the number currently in receipt of the working families tax credit in Liverpool, Riverside are not yet available, but, on the basis of the known family credit figures for that constituency and expected eligibility nationally for the working families tax credit, the estimated number who may be eligible is 2,600 families.

Mr. Twigg: Is my hon. Friend aware that almost half a million children in the north-west live in households that earn less than half the national income, and that thousands in my constituency live in poverty? My constituency has the highest child mortality rate in England, so poverty is an important issue to me. Is there not a sharp contrast in the approach of the Government and that of the Opposition, who did nothing during their 18 years in office, whereas we have made a start on attacking poverty with the working families tax credit, the new deal for lone parents and a record rise in child benefit? Will my hon. Friend give me a guarantee that the Government will give the highest priority to the attack on poverty?

Dawn Primarolo: As my hon. Friend may know, the combination of the rises in child benefit, the working families tax credit and the minimum wage will lift 800,000 families out of poverty. The Government have declared their aim of eradicating child poverty over the next two decades. That is in stark contrast to the approach of the official Opposition, who say that they will abolish the working families tax credit and take all that money away from those families.

Dr. Palmer: All those with whom I have discussed the working families tax credit are extremely positive. The main reservation is whether we will succeed in reaching the great majority of those who are entitled to it. Is my hon. Friend satisfied that we are doing all that we can in that respect, or could we use Inland Revenue records to contact people who may not yet have claimed, or undertake other activities for that purpose?

Dawn Primarolo: As I said, the response line has taken 780,000 calls. The number of calls to the tax credit office is 1.5 million, the number of applications issued is 450,000, and the number of claims returned by 30 November 1999 for working families tax credit is 320,000. I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government will be watching closely to ensure that all the families entitled to the working families tax credit receive it.

Mrs. Ellman: I welcome my hon. Friend's answer. It is clear that the working families tax credit, together with employment opportunities, allows individual families a way out of poverty and boosts local economies at the same time. What additional support may be available through child care support offered by the Government? Can my hon. Friend make an assessment of the implications for my constituents in Liverpool if the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats continue with their opposition to the working families tax credit, which they displayed by voting against it at various stages?

Dawn Primarolo: As my hon. Friend knows, the working families tax credit is linked to a child tax credit to pay for child care arrangements. That has been hugely welcomed by families who want to return to work and by employers, who see that as an advantage to them in the recruitment and retention of valued staff. The official Opposition condemn the working families tax credit and announce that they will withdraw it, but they will have to explain to those people affected why they will force on them a tax rise averaging £24 a week, and why they will deny women access to paid child care so that they can stay in the labour market.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Labour Members do not seem to understand that the working families tax

credit merely replaces family credit, which was a successful benefit doing exactly what the Government claim that the working families tax credit will do—make work pay. One of the reasons why the Opposition dislike the working families tax credit is that it extends the benefit far too high up the income scale and includes people on top rate tax. Will the hon. Lady tell us how many people in the north-west who pay top rate tax will receive the working families tax credit, including the number of people earning £38,000 a year, which is the highest income on which one can still be eligible for the working families tax credit?

Dawn Primarolo: There we have it: the official Opposition now confirm that they will abolish the working families tax credit. As the hon. Lady knows, the total number of people eligible to claim family credit was 800,000; working families tax credit will go to 1.4 million families. Of those families claiming the working families tax credit, 70 per cent. have a total income of £17,000 or less a year. She will need to explain to them why she wants to put their tax up and take that credit away from them.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): What estimate has the hon. Lady made of the impact on the average level of wages in the north-west, the east midlands and Liverpool, Riverside of the working families tax credit? Has she given any consideration to the possible increase in the level of informal cash payments between employer and employee?

Dawn Primarolo: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the minimum wage has had the biggest impact on poverty pay in Britain—another policy that the Opposition opposed and say that they will revoke if they are ever elected. The hon. Gentleman should concentrate on how to deal with poverty wages and support families. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] The answer is that the Opposition do not want to support families or tackle poverty.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Could the Paymaster General explain why the working families tax credit is shown as a tax cut in the national accounts even though all the national and international accounting conventions and the Office for National Statistics insist that it should be shown not as a tax cut but as an item of public expenditure? Will she confirm—I see her hastily conferring with her right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary—that, if those fiddled figures are corrected, the increase in the tax burden since the general election, to which the Chancellor, although he is absent today, has finally admitted this week, would be even higher than has been recorded, both now and by the end of the Parliament?

Dawn Primarolo: The right hon. Gentleman knows full well that the calculation for the tax credit follows the same procedure as, for instance, mortgage interest relief at source did under the Conservative Government. Instead of arguing and pursuing something that he knows to be incorrect, he will need to explain to working families in his constituency why he wants to take the credit away from them, increasing their tax burden by an average of £24 a week.

Employment (West Midlands)

2. **Mr. Michael J. Foster** (Worcester): What assessment he has made of the impact of his macro-economic policies on levels of employment and unemployment in the west midlands. [101766]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): In the west midlands region, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, we have created a sound and credible platform of economic stability that will help us attain our objective of high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the election, employment in the west midlands has risen by 53,000 and unemployment has fallen by 14,000, both broadly in line with UK trends.

Mr. Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that, in Worcester, unemployment has fallen by 38 per cent. since April 1997? Would he put that down solely to the stability brought about by giving the Bank of England independence, or would he, like me, agree that positive contributions have also been made by the national minimum wage, the working families tax credit, the new deal for the unemployed and the £40 billion extra money to be spent on our schools and hospitals?

Mr. Smith: Yes indeed. On the platform of stability that we have created by the decision to which my hon. Friend refers, 193,000 people in the west midlands have benefited from the national minimum wage, 125,000 families have benefited from the working families tax credit, and 36,000 young people have been helped off the dole and into jobs thanks to the new deal. Let us also applaud the businesses in the west midlands and their work forces for making a success of that region's crucially important economy.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Table B9 of the pre-Budget report shows that, despite recent reassurances, the take from fuel duty will increase dramatically from £21.6 billion this year to a massive £23.5 billion—

Madam Speaker: Order. I do not have the material before me, but is it related to the west midlands?

Mr. Paterson: Yes.

Madam Speaker: As a west midlands Member, I know where the boundaries are, and I wanted to make quite sure.

Mr. Paterson: I am delighted to share the same region as you, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister name one business in the west midlands that the Government's vicious attack on all road users has made more competitive; and will he cite the number of people who have been made unemployed in the west midlands haulage industry?

Mr. Smith: Last month, Johnson Automotive announced another 500 jobs and a new manufacturing plant in the west midlands to produce parts for the new Mini. That is only one of many firms that have extra confidence in the west midlands. I am sure that the

hon. Gentleman's constituents, like others in the region, will welcome my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's decision to end the fuel duty escalator that the hon. Gentleman's party introduced, and to ensure that any increases above inflation will be dedicated to public transport and road building, for the benefit of his constituents and the success of a critically important economy.

Mutual Societies

3. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What recent discussions he has had with the Building Societies Association regarding mutuality. [101767]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I had the pleasure of addressing the Building Societies Association annual lunch on 11 November. I have been engaged in regular correspondence with building societies, setting out the Government's position on a range of issues.

Mr. Pike: Although the measures that the Government have recently taken to protect building societies and the increasing number of people who sign motions are welcome, do my hon. Friend and the Government endorse the decision of members of the Leek United, who have clearly said no to predators and carpetbaggers? Does she agree that that shows that the Government and building societies believe that long-term advantages outweigh short-term cash in hand, and that there is a future for mutuality and building societies in the 21st century?

Miss Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome for our moves to amend secondary legislation, and I emphasise that I share his view of the role that building societies play. We acknowledge the variety and choice that building societies bring to the savings and loans market. They enhance competition to the consumer's benefit. Smaller societies in particular can provide a regional focus and high-quality finance jobs in our regions. They often have a close understanding of their local markets, and we value their contribution to the UK economy.

Debt Relief

5. **Mr. Andrew Reed** (Loughborough): What discussions he has had since the Cologne summit with the IMF on debt relief for the world's poorest countries. [101769]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): My right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development wrote to the managing director of the International Monetary Fund and the president of the World Bank on 1 December to press for countries to be brought forward quickly under the new debt relief initiative agreed at this year's annual meetings. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor met the managing director of the IMF and the president of the World Bank on 7 December.

Mr. Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. While it is appreciated that there is a need to speed up the process, and especially the heavily indebted poor countries initiative, will she also ensure that, in future discussions, the measures are more closely linked to poverty reduction in the countries that receive the benefit? We can thus ensure that all moneys are well spent and attack the real problems of world poverty.

Miss Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued pressure on us to take more account of poverty. The Government are pursuing that at every opportunity. With the World Bank and the IMF, we have made sure that they have formed new joint working partnerships to flesh out the new poverty reduction strategies and to ensure that their focus is alleviating poverty in the affected countries.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): The Minister will recall the Chancellor proudly proclaiming at the Labour party conference that he would cancel third-world debt. Can she confirm whether that means 100 per cent. guaranteed cancellation or cancellation of only the debt accrued before the Paris Club decided to reschedule the debt of a particular country? If it means the latter, as many of us suspect, will she also confirm that, in some cases, only 40 per cent. of debt—and, for Uganda, only debt accrued up to 1981—would be cancelled?

Miss Johnson: The Chancellor said on 30 September that the UK is prepared, on a case-by-case basis, to go further than 90 per cent.—and possibly up to 100 per cent., if necessary—when debt relief would finance poverty relief—*[Interruption.]* For each individual country. The point of the figures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned is that we are writing off two thirds of the debt of the poorest countries under the definitions of the HIPC initiative. The Government are committed to that and a great deal of progress is being made in achieving those goals.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Since the Cologne summit, what conditions have been imposed and what monitoring has been done to ensure that those countries that benefit from debt relief are applying more resources to education and health care?

Miss Johnson: We have, as I said, made sure that there is a focus on poverty and that we address health issues. We expect a number of countries to be able to benefit shortly from the enhanced HIPC 2 programme and hope that Uganda, Mozambique, Bolivia and Mauritania will all be ready to do so soon. On 8 December, Honduras met the IMF board to open discussions on the process. There is much greater focus throughout on the programmes that the hon. Gentleman and I both want in place.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Does my hon. Friend consider the powers and policy of the IMF adequate to help countries in financial crisis? Will she comment in particular on the recent statement by Mr. Larry Summers, the United States Treasury Secretary, that the IMF should confine itself to short-term loans and leave long-term loans to the private sector?

Miss Johnson: We have continued to press for greater transparency in matters with which the IMF deals. We support in particular Larry Summers's comments in relation to considering the establishment of a fundamentally new framework for the international

community's efforts to combat poverty that will give the World Bank the lead and the IMF a more tightly focused role. We also believe, as he does, that, although macro-economic stability is necessary, it may be far from sufficient to create lasting and inclusive growth. There is a commitment to transparency, and we believe that there is no reason why the IMF's operational budget, for example, should not be published regularly. He and the UK Government share views on those moves and are looking to what would be the right future for the IMF.

Taxation

6. **Mr. James Clappison** (Hertsmere): What was the proportion of gross domestic product represented by net taxes and social security contributions on *(a)* 1 May 1997 and *(b)* the latest date for which information is available. [101770]

10. **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): In which quarters since May 1997 the percentage of GDP taken by the Government in tax over the previous 12 months has risen. [101774]

12. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): In which quarters the percentage of gross domestic product taken by the Government in tax over the preceding 12 months has fallen since May 1997. [101776]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): Decisions on the public finances are taken on a financial year basis. Financial year figures for the tax-GDP ratio can be found in the pre-Budget report. They show that the tax-GDP ratio is lower this year than last. It will be lower in the two following years than last year. Under the previous Government's plans, those rates would have been higher than the latest projections, in this year and for the next two years.

Mr. Clappison: As the Minister is unable to provide the figures that were specifically requested in my question, may I put this to him? Will he simply say whether the tax burden is greater or lesser than when the Government came to office?

Mr. Smith: The pre-Budget report shows—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] The hon. Gentleman asked for figures. The pre-Budget report shows that the share of GDP going on tax this year is 37 per cent. Last year, it was 37.4 per cent; for next year the projection is 36.8 per cent. That shows a tax burden that is falling, not going up.

Mr. Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman seems to be having some difficulty, let us deal with the matter in multiple-choice terms. Does he agree with the Chancellor, who said on Tuesday that the tax burden was increasing, or with the Prime Minister, who said on 24 November—this can be found in column 609 of *Hansard*—that it was decreasing?

Mr. Smith: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor did not say that the tax burden was increasing, because it is not increasing. I shall give the hon. Gentleman the figures again. They are 37.4 per cent. for last year, 37 per cent. for this year and 36.8 per cent. for next year. That is a tax burden that is decreasing, not increasing. Moreover, it is smaller this year, and will be smaller next year and the year after, than it would have been under the Conservatives.

Mr. Brady: The Chief Secretary really ought to come clean. The Chancellor made it clear on Tuesday that, since the Government had taken office, the tax burden had become larger than it was in 1997. Does the Chief Secretary agree with that? Will he now make it clear that it is the case?

Mr. Smith: I will take no lectures on coming clean from Opposition Members who broke the promises that they had made about tax when they were in government. We are keeping each and every promise that we made about tax at the election.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I had a very interesting meeting with some business men last week. They told me—*[Interruption.]* The Tories would do well to listen. They told me that they wanted the tax burden to increase. *[Laughter.]* Yes, and they are telling the Tories the same. They say that that would reduce demand, and would take the pressure off interest rates. Is that not an interesting case which business men are now making?

Mr. Smith: I am sorry to disappoint my hon. Friend, but I cannot assure him—or, through him, the business people to whom he has been talking—that the tax burden is increasing. I have already given the House the figures, which show that the tax burden is decreasing.

I should have expected those business people to welcome particularly the cuts that we have made in corporation tax, which mean that our rate is the lowest in the industrialised world.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Is my right hon. Friend aware that organisations such as the Royal Automobile Club and the Automobile Association were extremely critical of the tax burden placed on motorists by the Tory Government, who introduced the fuel duty escalator? Is he aware that those organisations have welcomed the hypothecation of future real-terms revenue increases in fuel duty? Will he ensure that there is a continuing dialogue with organisations such as the RAC, which is very supportive of the Government's choice of priorities for the purpose of spending the extra revenue?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend is right: the AA, the RAC and other organisations—and motorists in general—were very concerned about the continuation of the fuel duty escalator introduced by the last Government, and have welcomed my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's decision.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Why is it going up?

Mr. Smith: I am telling the House about my right hon. Friend's decision to end the escalator introduced by the hon. Gentleman's party. As my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) said, that decision will be greatly appreciated by motoring organisations, by motorists and, indeed, by the general public, who will—

as she says—benefit from the hypothecation of revenues over and above inflation for public transport and improvements in our road network.

Yes, there will be continuing dialogue on these matters.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the long-term tax reductions that the Government are introducing are based not just on cutting headline income tax and corporation tax, which they are doing, but on the fundamentals of lower interest rates, lower inflation rates and job security? Indeed, an extra 750,000 people are in jobs. A return to the boom and bust of the Jurassic park party opposite would simply inflict an extra 22 Tory taxes on the British people.

Mr. Smith: Yes indeed. The sensible and sound policies that we are following on fiscal matters complement our decisions to put a sound monetary framework in place and our measures to raise productivity, to equip our country with skills and to ensure that we are more competitive in future. My hon. Friend is right. The contrast could not be clearer than that between the Conservative party, which imposed 22 tax rises and broke its promises to the British people, and the Labour party, which has kept and is keeping each and every tax promise that it made on tax, as on everything else.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): It is scarcely credible that, even after the Chancellor admitted on Tuesday that the tax burden has risen since Labour came into office, the Chief Secretary is still arguing the toss. I remind him that the Government's own figures show that the tax burden was at 35.6 per cent. when they took office. It has gone up in every single quarter since then and is 37.7 per cent. now. Where does that leave the Prime Minister's pre-election promise that Labour had

"no plans to increase taxes at all"?

Does he agree with the Prime Minister's official spokesman, who is quoted in today's press as saying that getting at the truth on the tax burden is just a "game"?

Mr. Smith: I am sorry, but the right hon. Gentleman has missed again. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor did not say that the tax burden was rising; he said that it was falling. He said that because it is.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to promises made before the general election. I will tell him and the House what we promised. We promised not to raise the basic or top rates of income tax throughout the next Parliament and we have not. We said that our objective was a lower starting rate of income tax of 10p in the pound, a promise kept; we have delivered it.

We said that we would cut VAT on fuel to 5 per cent. when Conservative Members wanted to make it higher. We kept that promise and cut VAT on fuel. We said that we would not extend VAT to fuel, children's clothes, books, newspapers and public transport. We have not and we will not. We said that the welfare to work programme would be funded by a windfall levy on the excess profits of the privatised utilities. It was much derided and opposed by Conservative Members, but that is the policy that has delivered the new deal and cut youth unemployment by more than 60 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 50 per cent. The contrast could not be clearer between the party that keeps its promises on tax and the party that broke its promises.

Mr. Maude: The Chief Secretary still does not get it. The Prime Minister said before the election:

"We have no plans to increase taxes at all."

Was that a promise? What does the Chief Secretary understand that to have meant? The fact is that Labour got elected by promising not to increase taxes at all. Once elected, almost the first thing it did was to raise taxes massively by stealth. In every quarter since the election, the tax burden has increased. Ministers do not just deny it; they claim the opposite—that taxes are falling. Now that the Chancellor has finally admitted that the tax burden is remorselessly rising, what does he say? He says that Labour did not make that promise in the first place. When will we eventually see the end to the great Labour lie on tax?

Mr. Smith: I can only repeat: the Chancellor did not say that the tax burden is increasing because it is not. It is going down. I can give the figures again: 37.4 per cent. last year, 37 per cent. this year, 36.8 per cent. next year. More importantly for families and the taxes that they are paying, as a consequence of our tax changes, the average household is £380 a year better off and families with children are £740 a year better off—benefits which the Conservative party would clearly take away from them.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Labour Members have no lessons to learn from Conservative Members when it comes to setting tax levels? We keep our promises—on introducing the working families tax credit, lowering the starting tax rate by 1p, and introducing the 10p tax rate—whereas, in office, Conservative Members broke their promises, raising tax not once, not twice, but 22 times.

Mr. Smith: Yes. The electorate will no more forget those 22 Tory tax rises than they will the boom and bust that went with them and that inflicted such incalculable damage on our economy.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The Prime Minister yesterday admitted that, to overcome the Conservative deficit that the Government had inherited, tax had been increased in the their first two years in office, and promised that taxes would start to decrease. Does the Minister feel entirely comfortable with cutting 1p off income tax next year, even though the Secretary of State for Health has had to abandon waiting list targets, and out-patient waiting lists have not only doubled but, on current spending plans, are set to increase further?

Mr. Smith: Very comfortable—because it is absolutely in line with the promises that we made at the general election and not least because we are investing £21 billion extra in health.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Does not the obsession with the overall tax take conceal the very

important matter of tax distribution? Is it not indisputable that, since 1997, hundreds of thousands of low-income families have been taken out of the tax bracket entirely?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. Furthermore, 1.4 million households are benefiting, by an average £24 a week, from the working families tax credit—which is a real advantage and a tax cut that Conservative Members would remove from them.

Land Settlement Tenants (Compensation)

7. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): What plans he has to meet the chairman of the Inland Revenue and hon. Members to discuss tax issues relating to compensation given to former land settlement tenants. [101771]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): There are no plans for such a meeting. Representations have been made querying the raising of tax charges by the Inland Revenue in respect of an out-of-court compensation paid by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in the early 1990s, to a number of former tenants of the Land Settlement Association, but it has been made clear that Ministers do not intervene in individual cases. The Inland Revenue's independence from Treasury Ministers in handling individuals' tax affairs must be scrupulously observed. When disputes continue between taxpayers and the Revenue, it is for the appeal commissioners and the courts to determine how the law is to be applied.

Mr. Robertson: I thank the Minister for that reply. At some stage, however, Ministers have been involved in the matter. Although the Minister quite rightly said that the award was made by MAFF in the early 1990s, the then Minister said in a letter to the chairman of the Inland Revenue that

"it was quite clearly Ministers' intention at the time of the settlement that the out-of-court payments were intended to compensate the ex-tenants of the LSA for personal hardship . . . it was not therefore intended as taxable compensation for loss of earnings".

I really do think that the Minister should get involved in resolving what is clearly a gross inequity.

Dawn Primarolo: The rules applying to the Land Settlement Association are the same as those applying to all other taxpayers; an exception would be possible only if a specific amendment were in a Finance Bill or if an extra-statutory concession were publicly announced. Such an exception may be authorised only by a Treasury Minister, and Treasury Ministers in the previous Government made no such authorisation. Ministers in the previous Government did not put in place the rules that the hon. Gentleman claims that they should have. Consequently, normal taxpayer rules apply.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): The House will be aware—as I am sure that you are in the west midlands, Madam Speaker—that many land settlement tenants have retired or are farmers. The Government have hardly been helpful to those two categories of people—indeed, one might argue that those people have been victimised. By refusing to support the intent of the previous Government, are not the current Government imposing yet another stealth tax on two categories of people whom they have already hit hard? Secondly, will the Minister not admit, as the Chancellor has already admitted, that the overall burden of taxation has gone up from 35.3 per cent. of gross national product in the tax year 1996–97 to more than 37 per cent. this year, and that that is a marked rise in taxation?

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman fails to understand how the tax system works. It was not the intent of the previous Government to make such an arrangement. Had it been their intent, they would either have tabled a specific amendment to a Finance Bill—they did not; the issue was settled in the early 1990s—or put in place an extra-statutory concession to give influence to that compensation. The hon. Gentleman is asking us to breach the principle and require Ministers to get involved in individual taxpayers' affairs. Relations in the tax system are clear. An appeal must go to the appeal commissioners and then to the courts. That is the position over which the previous Government presided and it would be foolish to require Ministers to intervene in individual matters now. Some individuals have settled. Others continue to argue hardship. The proper way forward is for them to appeal to the appeal commissioners and then, if they are not satisfied, to the courts.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): In the light of the questions that she has been asked today, which does my hon. Friend think is falling faster—the tax burden or the reputation of the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude)?

Madam Speaker: Order. That was rather a wasted question.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Will the Minister reconsider what she has just said about the former tenants of the Land Settlement Association? We are talking about people who endured pain, suffering and hardship for years. Compensation for that is not taxable. Will she recognise that such poor people have no money to go to the special commissioners or through the Court of Appeal? Before they are driven down that route, there should be a meeting with the head of the Inland Revenue. The Minister should kindly read the question that she is answering, which refers not just to Ministers, but to the head of the Inland Revenue. Such a meeting would enable Members on both sides of the House who represent those poor people to help them find a fair way through their harsh and unfair situation and solve the problem before they are driven to court, adding to the burdens of those whose suffering we should be sympathising with rather than increasing.

Dawn Primarolo: I am surprised by the right hon. and learned Gentleman's heavy criticism of the actions of his colleagues when they were in power, because they decided not to make specific arrangements. As he knows, compensation for personal hardship is not liable to income tax. Compensation for loss of trading profits is taxable as a trading income. That was established when the compensation was paid by the previous Government, whose Treasury Ministers failed to make any legal provision of the type for which they are now arguing, to change the calculation of tax on compensation. They now

ask for a Treasury Minister to intervene in individual tax affairs. That should not and cannot happen. The appeal system is clear in legislation.

Exchange Rate

11. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What his definition is of a competitive sterling exchange rate; and if the United Kingdom currently meets that definition. [101775]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): The Government do not have a target exchange rate for sterling. By pursuing policies for sound public finances, sustained growth and low inflation, the Government are creating the environment for achieving and maintaining a stable and competitive exchange rate over the medium term.

Dr. Cable: How do the Government reconcile their commitment to a stable and competitive exchange rate with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data which came to the House of Commons Library yesterday, which show that the price competitiveness of British industry, and exporters generally, has declined by 6 per cent. this year; 12 per cent. since the Government came to office; and 30 per cent. since the beginning of 1996? Is the objective simply not attainable, and would it not be more honest for the Government to acknowledge that they are not even proceeding in the right direction?

Mr. Timms: We have achieved a remarkable new stability in the economy since the election. The imperative now is to lock that in for the long term, and to build on it to deliver full employment for Britain in the new millennium. I recognise that there are real concerns, particularly for manufacturers selling their goods in Europe, but short-term fixes are not the answer. The pick-up in world growth is improving UK export performance. The latest three-month on three-month data show that goods export volumes, excluding oil and erratics, are up strongly by 8 per cent. to September. Services exports remain close to record high levels, and manufacturing output is up. In reality, the news on exports is encouraging.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The totally unexpected fall in the value of the euro in the past year has driven the pound up to record levels. The European Union, as a trading bloc, has a massive balance of payments surplus, inflation is barely 1 per cent. and unemployment is at 10 per cent. What pressure are the Government putting on our European partners to expand their economies so that the euro recovers and the pound can then fall in value?

Mr. Timms: That is a matter for them, but I entirely recognise that there are firms—particularly those selling goods in Europe—which are facing real difficulties. However, there is no quick fix here. The consensus among independent forecasters is that exports of goods and services will grow by 4 per cent. next year. Exporters are performing well, and CBI data on export orders show clear improvements on a year ago.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does the Minister accept the vital role that has been played by variable exchange rates in recent economic history? Does he recognise that most of the successful economies of the past few decades have succeeded because of the fact that they were benefiting from their currencies' variable exchange rate? Does he further accept that a variable exchange rate is a vital mechanism to recognise changing relationships between trading economies, and that, were that variable relationship not to be available, other things would have to vary domestically—not least inflation and unemployment?

Mr. Timms: Medium and long-term exchange rate stability is desirable, and requires the approach that we are taking—sound macro-economic policies for sustained growth and low inflation. We will not repeat the mistakes of the past with short-term fixes, which would take us back to Tory boom and bust. We are taking the right decisions for the long term to build for a future of full employment.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): Apart from telling them that there are no short-term fixes, does the Minister have any other advice for exporters who are wrestling with a competitive disadvantage of 20 or 30 per cent. in relation to previous years? Is it not the case that the improvement in manufactured exports has come about only because it is an improvement on pretty awful figures—figures which declined because of the impact of sterling over the past two to three years?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman is right—things are improving. However, I repeat that I recognise the difficulties that some exporters are facing. The Government attach great importance to the promotion of exports. That is why we established British Trade International in May, giving Britain a sharper edge in export markets. We want to work with exporters to maximise their success in overseas export markets.

Alcohol Smuggling

13. **Mr. Eric Illsley** (Barnsley, Central): What proposals he has to combat the smuggling of alcohol into the United Kingdom. [101777]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): The comprehensive spending review allocated customs an additional £35 million to tackle evasion of excise duties, enabling it to deploy 145 additional staff. Currently, another 55 officers have been redeployed to the south-east to tackle the seasonal peak in excise smuggling.

There has been a steady increase in the number of staff deployed on this work. At the beginning of this financial year, Customs had about 1,000 staff employed in combating excise smuggling. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in his pre-Budget

statement additional funding for customs to deploy a national network of X-ray scanners designed to detect smuggling in freight.

Mr. Illsley: I welcome that reply, but is my hon. Friend aware that in my constituency and the whole of the north of England, smuggling and illegal sales of alcohol are on the increase and are destabilising many legitimate traders? Will she consider the reintroduction of the wholesale liquor licence, which I understand was done away with in the early 1980s, to help to prevent illegal traders from selling contraband booze? Will she also reconsider the rates of duty on alcohol, and especially beer, and try to bring them more in line with those on the continent?

Dawn Primarolo: Customs has deployed 130 extra officers inland, away from the frontiers, to disrupt the illegal distribution networks. The Government have also increased the penalties for those caught dealing in these illegal goods. We have an agreement with Camelot, for example, that a trader who is convicted of trading in illegal goods would lose the licence to sell lottery tickets. In the pre-Budget report, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that we are considering the use of tax stamps to identify legitimate products, so that those who trade in products not bearing the stamp can be prosecuted.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I am delighted to hear of the new measures and the extra manpower that Customs and Excise has been able to deploy. That is good news. Does the Paymaster General agree, however, that the news is still very bad and that an enormous amount of illegal goods is getting through? Will she assure the House that Customs and Excise will prosecute whenever it has evidence, to ensure that people understand that the illegal trading is not just a fly job but a serious matter that is deeply destabilising to many firms in the south-east, which are under great pressure as a result of this wholly illegal activity?

Dawn Primarolo: Yes, I am happy to confirm that Customs and Excise will prosecute when we catch people dealing in these illegal goods. There are considerably more staff available for tackling the problem than there would have been under a Conservative Government: on election in 1997, we found that the Conservative Government had planned in their fundamental expenditure review to reduce by 300 the anti-smuggling staff. We kept those officers in place and have deployed them to do exactly the work that the hon. Gentleman implores us to do. He is quite right: the illegal selling undermines the legitimate trade and undermines our communities because of the criminal activity. We will continue to deal with the problem and to prosecute the offenders.

Growth Forecasting

14. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What assessment he has made of his Department's accuracy in forecasting United Kingdom growth since 1997. [101778]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): Recent forecasts have been very accurate compared with those in the past. We have been helped by the National Audit Office audit of key assumptions, and the Government are ensuring that fiscal plans are set on a sound and prudent basis.

Mr. Kidney: Does my hon. Friend recall how many forecasters, including the Opposition, scoffed at the Treasury's forecast in this year's Budget of growth of 1 to 1.5 per cent? They said that the forecast was unrealistically high, but it has now been completely vindicated. How does my hon. Friend explain the Treasury's forecasting success when so many people have egg on their faces?

Miss Johnson: As my hon. Friend says, the Treasury's success is rightly to be contrasted with that of the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, who said of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor at the time that we made those forecasts:

"Until he wakes up to the worrying economic prospects facing Britain, he will never be able to get to grips with the situation."

A couple of days later, the right hon. Gentleman said in his press release:

"The economy is heading for a far sharper slowdown than the Government is complacently predicting."

Is it any wonder, given that the Treasury got it right and the Opposition—as usual—got it wrong, that no one believes a word that the right hon. Member for Horsham says?

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): In the economic forecasts for United Kingdom growth, is not the Treasury now deliberately underestimating growth in years two and three in the pre-Budget report to massage the public finances and to hide a huge Budget surplus in future years? Are not the Government amassing a huge election war chest? Will the Minister tell the Chancellor when he returns from the G20 that there is no point in being an iron Chancellor if he leaves our public services to rust?

Miss Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. We have shown the prudence that the previous Government should have shown when they looked at a brief moment and decided to make economic decisions that led us into boom and bust in the 1980s. They should have looked to the longer term, and that is what this Government are doing. We have made prudent assumptions and we are sticking to them. I will take no lectures from the Liberal Democrats on forecasting because they have spent 1p so many times that most of us have lost count.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): How can the Government possibly hope to forecast anything accurately when they are in denial about what is happening now? We heard from the Chief Secretary earlier more of this eyewash about the tax burden falling, but the figures—I have them here from the Library—show that, in every single quarter from 1997 to the second quarter of 1999, which is the last quarter for which figures are available, the tax burden has increased. Let me throw

the figures to him now across the Dispatch Box so that he will not be able to continue to deny the facts. Can we please have an answer to the question?

Miss Johnson: The hon. Gentleman has, as usual, got it completely wrong. The figures are as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said. *[Interruption.]* I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for passing the figures across the Dispatch Box—*[Interruption.]* I do not need to pass across the key figures that Opposition need to reflect on, because they are their predicted tax rises for 1999–2002. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order, Mr. Paterson.

Miss Johnson: The Conservatives' figures for all three years show that there would have been a higher tax burden under a Conservative Government than there will be under Labour. As with everything else, the country is better off with a Labour Government.

Economic and Monetary Union

15. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): If he will make a statement on progress on implementation of the national changeover plan. [101779]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): Progress on the national changeover planning project was reported in the Treasury's third report on euro preparations on 1 November. Copies of the report are available in the Library.

Mr. Chapman: Is not the implementation of the national changeover plan the only sensible way to proceed? What individual or organisation—in the private or public sector—would proceed with the prospect of a decision when the conditions are satisfied without making adequate preparations? Does my hon. Friend not agree that the position of the Conservative party is entirely incomprehensible in that respect? Will she also tell me when the second implementation plan might be published?

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making exactly the right points on this matter. We need to take a lead in making preparations so that we are able to decide one way or another. We have consulted more than 100 organisations. The public sector has taken a lead in the preparations and, this month, the Bank of England issued a document on its work in this regard. We also now have the opportunity in our preparations to consider the experience of first-wave countries.

ECHR Judgment (Thompson and Venables)

12.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I should like to make a statement about the decision of the European Court of Human Rights, which announced its judgment this morning, in the case brought against the United Kingdom Government by Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. A copy of the judgment has been placed in the Library.

Those two youths were responsible for the appalling murder of James Bulger in Liverpool in February 1993. The whole House and the country have the deepest sympathy for James's parents. As Lord Reed, one of the court's judges, said in this judgment:

"the grief of James Bulgers' parents, who took part in the proceedings before the Court, is inexpressible."

He added that the fact that those responsible

"were themselves only ten years old at the time of the murder makes it particularly disturbing".

The authority of the European Court of Human Rights derives from our membership of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe was established after the war on the initiative of the allies, especially the United Kingdom. It now has 41 nations in membership. The Council predates the European Union, and is wholly separate from it.

The European convention on human rights is a convention of the Council of Europe and the Court of Human Rights, which sits in Strasbourg, is one of its principal institutions. British jurists played a leading role in drafting the convention and the UK was the first nation to ratify it in 1951. Successive UK Governments have, ever since and consistently, abided by the decisions of the court, introducing amending legislation in this Parliament where necessary.

In the case that Robert Thompson and Jon Venables brought before the Strasbourg court, the two youths essentially argued that facing trial in a Crown court and having their tariff set by the Home Secretary were inappropriate given their ages. They claimed that those arrangements breached articles 3, 5, 6 and 14 of the convention relating to powers of detention and the right to a fair trial. The youths were 11 at the time of conviction and they are now aged 17.

The House will understand that I have had only a short time to read the judgment, which was not issued to the public or to Ministers until early this morning. However, the key findings are as follows.

First, there were no violations of the European convention on human rights in respect of article 3 and, in one regard, in respect of article 5(1). Article 3 is on the right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment and it relates to matters of both trial and of sentence. In particular, the court held as lawful the age of 10 as the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales. It was also of the view that the particular features of the trial process did not cause,

"to a significant degree, suffering going beyond that which would inevitably have been engendered by any attempt by the authorities to deal with the applicant".

The court also held that there had been no violation in respect of article 5(1), the right to liberty. It held that the sentence of detention at Her Majesty's pleasure was clearly lawful under English law and was not arbitrary. However, the court did find violations in respect of article 6(1), the right to a fair trial, and, under articles 6(1) and 5(4), relating to the setting of the tariffs and their continued review.

On article 6(1), the right to a fair trial, the court found that, notwithstanding the special arrangements made to help ensure that the youths could properly participate in the trial process in the Crown Court,

"it was highly unlikely that either applicant would have felt sufficiently uninhibited, in the tense court room and under public scrutiny, to have consulted with their legal representatives during the trial or, indeed, that, given their immaturity and disturbed emotional state, they would have been capable outside the court room of co-operating with their lawyers and giving them information for the purpose of their defence".

It therefore followed, in the view of the court, that the applicants had been denied a fair hearing in breach of article 6(1).

On the setting of tariffs and their continued review, the court first held that there was a fundamental distinction between the sentence for murder in respect of juveniles and that for murder in respect of adults. As far as the latter—the sentence for adults—was concerned, the European Court, in an earlier judgment on the 1994 Wynne case, had accepted the lawfulness of the mandatory life sentence for adults convicted of murder. It had also accepted as lawful the arrangements for tariff-setting by the Secretary of State.

Today's judgment does not deal with the arrangements for adults who have been, or will be, convicted of murder in the courts in England and Wales. However, in this case, which involves juveniles, the European Court followed a decision by the House of Lords' Appellate Committee of the Privy Council that the setting of the tariffs for juveniles was itself a sentencing exercise. The court added that, as the Home Secretary—who set the applicants' tariffs—was clearly not independent of the Executive, there had been a breach of article 6(1) in respect of the determination of the applicants' tariffs.

On article 5(4), the court held that, because the applicants' tariffs had been decided by the Home Secretary, there had been no judicial supervision incorporated in the initial fixing of their sentences. The court therefore found a violation of article 5(4) based on the lack of any opportunity for the applicants to have the lawfulness of their detention assessed by a judicial body.

In summary, therefore, the court has found in favour of the United Kingdom Government on two important issues—that Robert Thompson and Jon Venables were never subjected to inhumane or degrading treatment by the Government, and that the sentences imposed by the court were not inconsistent with the requirements of the convention. However, it has found against the United Kingdom on issues relating to the trial process, to the way in which the tariff linked to their sentence was set, and to the failure subsequently to review the tariff.

The judgment does not overturn the verdict of murder in this case, nor does it in any way exonerate the two youths for their part in this terrible crime. The judgment does not direct their release from custody. The parole board remains responsible for deciding release in these cases.

As with any such decision of the court, the Government accept its judgment. However, the full judgment runs to 120 pages, and the House will understand that I need to

study carefully the detail of what the court has said, and fully to consider the implications. I will of course report the outcome of my considerations to Parliament as soon as possible, and it will be for Parliament to agree any change that may appear to be required in the legislative framework for dealing with juvenile offenders in these circumstances.

The appalling murder of James Bulger—a two-year-old murdered by two 10-year-olds—profoundly shocked this country and continues to do so, but the real agony is felt by James's parents. It is they who have endured, and will continue to endure, the profound grief of losing their son—a fact which nothing can ever repair.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and for his courtesy in giving me an early sight of it. Of course I accept that he is studying the judgment. Indeed, I would have been the first to criticise had he come to this House with ready-made decisions without studying it in more depth. Nevertheless, I will ask him to indicate his thinking on one or two matters that have been the subject of much public discussion.

Does the Home Secretary agree that a tariff must reflect what is appropriate to the crime itself, rather than take into account the various stages at which the nature of imprisonment changes? He will be aware that there has been considerable discussion about whether it is right for Thompson and Venables to enter the adult system. Does he agree that that is not germane to setting a tariff, but that a tariff must reflect the gravity and nature of the crime, rather than any consideration about the nature of the imprisonment involved?

Does the Home Secretary agree, from his knowledge of tariffs, that, had these two been adults, the tariff would probably have been in the region of 25 years and that, therefore, an appropriate and, indeed, sizeable discount was given to reflect their youth? Does he agree also that that tariff is roughly comparable to that involved in the only other roughly comparable crime committed by a child of similar age, and that the tariff of 15 years is not vastly in excess of the time served by Mary Bell, who also transferred to the adult system during the course of her imprisonment?

Will the Home Secretary confirm that it is the case that, in July 1996, our Court of Appeal upheld the Home Secretary's right to adopt the same policy for setting tariffs for young offenders as for adults, and that decision gave legitimacy to the practice? Furthermore, does he recognise that the power to increase tariffs has been used hundreds of times without challenge?

Naturally, I accept that the Home Secretary is studying the judgment. Is he in any position to indicate, even in a preliminary fashion, what options might be available? For example, does he feel absolutely compelled to change the nature of the Home Secretary's role? He has observed—the House will be grateful for this—that the judgment does not affect the verdict. Does he agree, and can he say whether, even had the trial been conducted under the juvenile rather than the adult system, it is most unlikely that anything would have happened other than that Thompson and Venables would still have been convicted and sentenced to detention at Her Majesty's pleasure?

Does the Home Secretary agree that it is in the interests not only of James Bulger's parents and the surviving relatives but of Thompson and Venables themselves that they settle down to complete their sentence without the regular glare of publicity that this case involves, and that being encouraged to look upon themselves as victims of the system rather than perpetrators of a serious crime will not help them come to terms with what they have done and to lead law-abiding lives thereafter?

Conservative Members join absolutely with the Home Secretary in renewing our sympathy for James Bulger's parents and other members of his family and expressing the horror which we all felt at that crime, at the vulnerability of the victim, and at the shockingly young age of the perpetrators. I thank him again for his statement and should be grateful for as much elucidation as he can give on the points that I have raised.

Mr. Straw: In turn, I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the way in which she put those questions. She asked a number of specific questions about the setting, or resetting, of tariffs in these cases. I crave the indulgence of the right hon. Lady and the House if I do not go down that road. These matters require the most careful consideration; I do not believe that it would be appropriate to offer views on them, given that, like everyone else, I have only had the judgment for about three hours.

It is important for the House and the country to understand that setting a tariff sets the minimum sentence which someone convicted of these grave crimes can serve for retribution and deterrence. It is only at the end of the serving of a tariff that the issue of release arises. Then, an assessment of risk is made as to whether it is safe to release the individual, whether it is an adult convicted of murder or someone who is serving a sentence at Her Majesty's pleasure—typically, a juvenile. The assessment of, and final decision on, adult murderers is made by the Home Secretary of the day, but the decision about those detained at Her Majesty's pleasure is, as a result of a separate decision of the European Court of Human Rights, made by the parole board. However, many people convicted of murder—both adults and juveniles—serve a sentence significantly beyond their tariff because the Home Secretary of the day or the parole board judge that it is not safe to release them any earlier.

I have read the judgment as carefully as possible, as I previously read the preliminary decision of the European Commission of Human Rights. It is important to appreciate that the issue is not the guilt or innocence of the two youths—it relates instead to the circumstances in which the trial had taken place, the setting of tariffs and the allegation that there had been insufficient judicial supervision of the sentence post-tariff but before its expiry.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): This was a terrible crime, and our sympathies go to the family of James Bulger, particularly his parents. Can my right hon. Friend clear up some of my confusion? If the European Court has accepted that a fair trial was denied, under article 6(1), how does the verdict stand? The trial was either fair or it was not. Can my right hon. Friend explain that contradiction, now or later?

Mr. Straw: I am afraid that the matter is not as simple as that. Our domestic courts may decide that an error had been made in the process of a trial but that it was not such as to require a guilty verdict to be overturned. I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) to look in detail at the judgment.

[Mr. Straw]

As I have already made clear, the European Court of Human Rights found in favour of the United Kingdom Government in two respects. One was with regard to a claim by the applicants that aspects of the trial process relating to the age of criminal responsibility breached their rights under article 3 not to be subject to inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. The Court also found in favour of the United Kingdom in respect of the applicants' rights to liberty under article 5. It was in respect of aspects of article 6(1), on the right to a fair trial, and article 5, on the detention of anyone in Council of Europe countries, that the court held that there had been a violation. The court did not say, therefore, in the sense in which it is understood in common parlance in the UK, that the trial at Preston Crown court was defective and that the verdict should be overturned. That was never at issue.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I thank the Home Secretary for his prompt, accurate, considered and welcome statement. I join him and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) in saying to the family of James Bulger that the House and the country remain supportive and sympathetic. We share their belief that, when young people commit terrible crimes, they should be properly punished.

It is an instructive point of the decision that the family of the victim were represented before the hearing in the European court. Will the Home Secretary consider how we can better ensure that victims who survive or the families of victims who do not can be represented in the processes that precede decision and sentence? One of the great complaints about our system is that great attention is given to hearing the defendants, while little is given to hearing the views of those who have been victims or who have suffered bereavement, as in this terrible case.

I should make just three further points. Does the Home Secretary agree that the case does not for one moment suggest that, simply because we require fair trials for children—even if differently fair from those for adults—we should not have appropriate and severe sentences for children, just as we should for adults who offend?

Like me, the Home Secretary has had only a short while to consider the judgment, but will he reflect on the key element of the decision that we should move away from political decisions on sentencing to judicial decisions? We must all welcome that. Means exist for dealing with lenient or excessive sentences, but they should be judicial means, free of political interference. That does not necessarily mean less severe or shorter sentences, but it must mean sentences beyond a political context that might be affected by the pressure of the moment.

The Home Secretary should feel vindicated by what the case makes clear about his decision, which we strongly supported, to incorporate the European convention on human rights into British law in the Human Rights Act 1998—due to take effect next year. That decision will mean that, from next year, decisions taken in the UK will not be pronounced on from over there in Europe. Our courts will be able to take decisions on the basis of British and European human rights law. That will produce more immediate verdicts, and verdicts more likely to be right first time, rather than prolonging the terrible trauma of those who suffer from court cases such as the Bulger case.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the manner of the hon. Gentleman's remarks. It was extremely important to the family that they were represented at Strasbourg. I entirely accept that we must do a great deal more to ensure that the victims or, in the case of murder, their families, are able to play a more dignified role in our court process. Previous Governments considered that, and we are thinking further about it. Already, there have been developments in victims' statements. I meet many relatives of victims of murder. Anyone who has met such people knows how harrowing that experience is. One of their main complaints is that they feel as if they are spectators—at best—in the court process. They do not ask to take over prosecution, recognising that that is a proper role for the state. However, we must examine our procedures and the experiences of some other countries to see whether families could play a better and more dignified role.

The hon. Gentleman suggests that, under the current system, setting tariffs and determining release are political decisions. I do not think that that is the appropriate adjective to attach to our system. I do not want to speak about the arrangements for tariff-setting in respect of juveniles, as that is a matter which I have to consider in the light of the judgment of the European Court in Strasbourg, but the arrangements for setting the tariff and for release in respect of adults have been taken seriously by successive Home Secretaries, who have sought to exercise their judgment in a quasi-judicial way.

I can speak only personally, but I believe that I speak on behalf of others who have held this office. In every case where we are faced with such difficult decisions, we must consider the matter in a quasi-judicial way, first because that is right, and secondly because such decisions are, rightly, the subject of intense scrutiny and supervision by the courts through the process of judicial review. Moreover, the reasons that led us to make those decisions are the subject of full disclosure.

The hon. Gentleman's final point related to the incorporation of the European convention on human rights into our domestic law, which will come into force on 2 October next year. I believe that that should help the United Kingdom to ensure that that convention and the jurisprudence of the court impacts on our institutions in a way that is more attuned to our law. That was one of the reasons why the noble Lord Kingsland, the shadow Lord Chancellor, speaking on behalf of the Opposition, commended the incorporation of the convention, which has become part of the Human Rights Act 1998. Although that may reduce the number of times that the UK Government are taken to the Strasbourg court, it will not eliminate that process. There will still be occasions when applicants seek to overturn judgments made by our courts or by Parliament.

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and align myself with the comments that he and other hon. Members have made expressing sympathy and continuing support for the Bulger family.

Inevitably, we will concentrate on that case and the criminal law aspects involved. Before I entered the House, I practised as a Scottish solicitor, and my specialism was

child care law. When I was learning my trade 25 or so years ago, I quickly learned how poorly we deal with children in all aspects of our legal system.

I am not asking for a decision today but, when my right hon. Friend, together with other relevant Ministers, considers the full implications of this case, will he see it as an opportunity for us to undertake a proper examination of the rights of children in our society, and in particular of the way in which the legal processes deal with children?

Mr. Straw: With great respect to my hon. Friend, may I decline his invitation? It is extremely important that I carefully look at the judgment and consider its implications. I am aware that some people are concerned about the way in which our courts deal with such cases. I must tell my hon. Friend, however, that dealing with children who have committed, or who are alleged to have committed, grave crimes is difficult in any jurisdiction.

There is sometimes criticism of our system for its adversarial nature and the fact that it is more public than some people would wish, yet, when I speak to my colleagues who are European Ministers of Justice and the Interior, their concerns often come from the other direction. Their systems are sometimes seen to lack public confidence because they are perceived as wholly private.

On the general issue of juvenile delinquency, it is interesting that the French Government—in the light of recent events, the House will excuse me if I mention that country—are studying with great care our system for dealing with young offenders because of considerable public concern in France that their more welfare-based system is seen to be ineffective in dealing with young criminals and in maintaining public confidence.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I thank the Home Secretary for his courtesy in giving me early sight of his statement.

I once again associate myself with those who have offered sympathy to the parents of James Bulger. I also particularly associate myself with the remarks made by the Home Secretary in answer to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) about the painstaking and conscientious nature of the tariff-setting process.

Does the Home Secretary agree that, if anyone had told those who signed the European convention on human rights in the immediate aftermath of the unspeakable horrors of the second world war that it would be applied to a case such as this, they would have reacted with utter disbelief?

Does the Home Secretary also agree that, if the judges at Strasbourg cannot resist the itch to intervene in such cases, their legitimacy will increasingly be called into question? Will the Home Secretary resume the efforts made by the previous Government to increase the margin of appreciation—that is, the extent to which member states of the Council of Europe are allowed to decide cases such as this in accordance with their own democratically accountable procedures and without outside interference?

Mr. Straw: I have to say to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that it is inappropriate in the current context for him to make what are partisan remarks even within his own party about our signature and application of the European convention on human rights. I cannot say what was in the mind of David Maxwell Fyfe, later a Conservative Lord Chancellor, who was one of the British jurists who played such a leading role in drafting the European convention on human rights, but what was certainly in the minds of those who drafted it was that it would set out a body of European law and jurisprudence, to which member states would voluntarily agree to comply.

I have to remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, during the whole period that the Conservative party has been in power, not just in the previous 18 years, but in the many years before that, he and his colleagues in his party fully accepted Britain's membership of the Council of Europe and, therefore, the obligations which went with it. In the other place on 3 November 1997, the noble Lord Kingsland, the shadow Lord Chancellor, said:

"on behalf of my party, I make no apologies for what is contained in that convention; we support its terms wholeheartedly."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 3 November 1997; Vol. 582, c. 1235.]

I would also point out to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, during the period that he was Home Secretary, he brought proposals to the House, which were accepted, to amend our domestic law so as to make it comply with decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, as he did in the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, following the case of Singh and Hussain, which led to the decision about the final release of those who are being detained at Her Majesty's pleasure being taken away from the Home Secretary and transferred to the parole board.

It is not just a fact of life but a central tenet of the rule of law that we are subject to the rule of law—in Britain that includes the law laid down by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, to which we have voluntarily agreed to comply. An aspect of the rule of law is that those who hold political office sometimes find that decisions may be made by judges which we may or may not happily have made ourselves, but that is an important part of the separation of powers on which our democracy is founded.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): I thank my right hon. Friend for his prompt statement. He is right to say that the tragedy will affect members of the Bulger family for as long they live. It traumatised a generation of parents, as any sensitive person who went shopping in the wake of the case and watched parents with their children knows. They were traumatised in the same way as my generation in the wake of the Moors murders.

As I understand it, the European Court had no difficulty with 10 as the age of criminal responsibility. That must be correct: children of 10 know the difference between right and wrong. However, the difficulty was that the mode of trial offered in the juvenile courts was not appropriate to the case, and it was therefore transferred to the Crown Court. During his deliberations, will my right hon. Friend consider the operation of the juvenile court, and make it possible to give due process to children who commit what are, hopefully, rare crimes?

Mr. Straw: I entirely associate myself with my hon. Friend's comments about the way in which this terrible case—not least, the image of that two-year-old child being led away to his death—traumatised a generation of parents more than any other event in the decade. It has

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had serious consequences; children are under much greater supervision and are not allowed the freedom that our generation enjoyed to explore the areas in which we lived. All of us who are parents know the anxiety that single events—thankfully, rare events—cause parents.

The European Court was right to accept that our age of criminal responsibility is lawful. As it pointed out, the age of 10 is higher than in some other member countries, including—I add this to the judgment, which omitted it—Scotland, where the age of criminal responsibility is eight, not 10.

The court made two decisions in respect of articles 3 and 6. One was in the United Kingdom Government's favour, and the other went in the applicants' favour. They must be studied with considerable care, but they have implications for the venue and form of trial. While the juvenile courts are able to deal with less serious matters—their sentencing power is about to be increased under the Detention and Training Order so that they can give sentences of two years—we would have to think long and hard about whether that venue would be appropriate for trying grave crimes. Frankly, I doubt it. We shall have to consider alternative systems for such trials.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Those of us who practise in the criminal court—and, indeed, society as a whole—have great difficulty with the judgment. I have recently completed a trial of a murder case in which I acted for a defendant of 16. Neither the forum nor the procedures prevented me from properly representing that young man. I ask the Home Secretary to remind everyone that the two persons whom we are discussing are undoubtedly guilty of murder. Has there been a recommendation for compensation? If so, how much? How does it equate with any payments that may have been made to the parents of the young boy who was killed?

I support my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and ask the Home Secretary whether the language of the convention is being strained in this case. Should he not seek ways of impressing on the court that it should be wary of disturbing the practices and institutions of courts that have been established in democratic states by democratic bodies? If it goes on doing that, it will fundamentally undermine our respect for the convention and the court.

Mr. Straw: On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's first observation, I of course accept his wide experience, as someone who practises at the criminal Bar. There are significant differences between a trial in which a 16-year-old is the defendant—*[Interruption.]* No, we must consider this serious point as we take account of the judgment. There is a huge difference between 10-year-olds and 15 or 16-year-olds, some of whom pass for adults and are only a year from the age at which they are treated as adults for certain purposes of the criminal law under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. Indeed, only a few years ago, they were treated as adults for all purposes. This case has been made particularly difficult at all stages because the defendants were 10 when they committed the crime and 11 when they were convicted of it. I must also place it on record, as the court did, that the trial judge and everyone else made huge efforts to ensure that, within the framework of our criminal law and process, the two defendants were able properly to understand what was going on and not gratuitously intimidated by the process.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked me to say whether the two youths were undoubtedly guilty of those crimes. As he knows, that was the conviction of the court. I understand that there was no appeal against that conviction at the time to the criminal division of the Court of Appeal, and it is not affected by this morning's judgment. There was no recommendation for compensation because no compensation was claimed by the applicants or their representatives. The other point that he made should be the subject of wider discussion at another time and I refer him to my answer to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). I would add, however, that I believe that, had we incorporated the European convention into our domestic law some decades ago—that was resisted by parties on both sides of the House for quite a period—we would have achieved in practice greater benefit than we have from the margin of appreciation.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I echo the sentiments expressed by my right hon. and learned Friends the Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). Does the Home Secretary accept that, from time to time in a mature democracy and a mature judicial system, we have the right to review what has been, and that what may have been appropriate 50 years ago may no longer be appropriate? Surely this case and others could show that it may be time to review altogether our relationship with the convention and the court. It may now be inappropriate for a body sitting in another country and far from here, and with perhaps a completely different outlook on life, to intervene—albeit with our voluntary consent up to now—in the proper, mature and accountable dealings of our judicial system, supported by our democracy.

Mr. Straw: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to think about whether we should remain members of the Council of Europe, that is a matter for him. We cannot cherry-pick our international obligations. We are members of the Council of Europe, which, in my judgment, has been a huge force for human good and has reduced the risk of world war. There were two such wars in a generation in Europe and millions of people were killed. Applicant countries that have emerged from Soviet control are having to bring their judicial systems up to the standards set by the Council of Europe as a result of international obligations imposed on them. It is because of the international rule of law, from which this country benefits, that other Council of Europe members have also had to accept the decisions of the court—and they do accept them.

I—and Her Majesty's Government—have no proposals for withdrawal from the Council of Europe and its obligations. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to pursue the issue, that is a matter for him, but this is an argument in which he must engage within his own party. When his party was in government, it supported the convention, and supported the Council of Europe. His own shadow Lord Chancellor supported the incorporation of the convention into our domestic law when the Bill that became the

Human Rights Act 1998 was going through the other place; and I remind him that, on Third Reading here, the Opposition Front Bench supported incorporation, and did not vote against it. I am pleased about that, because it demonstrated all-party support. As I explained to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), incorporation will enable us to ensure, over time, that the court is more sensitive in regard to our domestic law and traditions. The answer is not withdrawal from the Council of Europe.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I have no appetite for arguing with my own party, but the right hon. Gentleman is the Secretary of State responsible for this matter. Will he consider the proposition that a perfectly proper and proportionate response to this judgment, and to a number of others, would be to conclude that the Council of Europe may have outlived its usefulness as far as the United Kingdom is concerned? *[Interruption.]* Such a conclusion might not be welcomed by certain Members who have made a career of the Council of Europe, but it would resonate among members of the public.

Mr. Straw: I do not accept that view, and I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was never taken by the Conservative Governments whom he supported. I will not detain the House, but there is a long list of occasions on which the House has been asked to introduce legislation to bring our domestic arrangements in regard to one part of the law or another into line with judgments against us in the Strasbourg court. Under the last Conservative Government, that ranged from changes made with regard to the interception of communications to changes in respect of discretionary life sentences, included in the Criminal Justice Act 1991, and changes contained in the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, passed in the dying days of that Government.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): This case raises huge issues that go to the heart of our judicial system and, indeed, our democracy, and one tends to worry about whether people fully understand all the ins and outs of the legal system. Will the Home Secretary consider how we might continue to engage the public in a discussion of questions arising from the case? Today's statement has made a welcome start, but, given the fundamental importance of many of the issues, I feel that we should think about how best to engage the public in a discussion of them and their consequences.

Mr. Straw: It remains an unfortunate fact that the public are too detached from the way in which our judicial system operates, which in turn leads to insufficient public confidence in our court system. There are a number of ways of dealing with that. One is through a thorough review of the way in which the courts operate. I am pleased to say that, on Tuesday, my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor announced just such a review, which is being undertaken by Lord Justice Auld, and which will take account of the implications of the Human Rights Act for the court system.

However, there is also the question of how we can involve victims more in the processes of the courts. We have to do that at every stage, whether victims have suffered a minor offence, or a grave crime, as in this case.

We have improved victim support funding. We are arranging for there to be victim and witness services at every magistrates court in the land. In addition, as I have made it clear to the House, we are looking carefully at how victim representatives can be involved in grave cases such as this.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's measured response in this tragic case. Does he agree that all hon. Members should guard against the danger of giving the public the perception that we welcome European Court of Human Rights decisions that support the United Kingdom Government, but heavily criticise those that do not? Does he agree that such a perception, which may be held by the public in the light of some of the comments in the House today, could be dangerous?

Mr. Straw: As I have said, people have different views about the judgments. In a democracy, they are fully entitled to those views. In any event, I have to consider the judgments very carefully, but I have made the point that separation of powers, which is an essential feature of democracy, means that those in the Executive sometimes have to accept decisions that they may not find welcome.

Business of the House

1.21 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 20 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Transport Bill.

TUESDAY 21 DECEMBER—Debate on public expenditure on a Government motion.

The provisional business for the first week back after the Christmas recess will be as follows:

MONDAY 10 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Political Parties and Referendums Bill.

TUESDAY 11 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill.

WEDNESDAY 12 JANUARY—Consideration in Committee of the Representation of the People Bill [2nd Day].

THURSDAY 13 JANUARY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the Representation of the People Bill [3rd Day].

FRIDAY 14 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

I said that I would endeavour at the start of each month to give an indication of the business that is likely to be taken in Westminster Hall. The Liaison Committee proposes that the following business should be taken in Westminster Hall on Thursdays during January:

THURSDAY 13 JANUARY—Genetically Modified Organisms and Biotechnology—First report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 1998–1999, HC 286; and the relevant Government response.

Fifth report from the Environmental Audit Committee, Session 1998–99, HC 384; and the relevant Government response.

THURSDAY 20 JANUARY—Debate on small firms.

THURSDAY 27 JANUARY—The Prison Service in Northern Ireland—Fourth report from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Session 1997-1998, HC 716; and the relevant Government response.

The debates on Select Committee reports have been set down by direction of the Chairman of Ways and Means after consultation with the Chairman of the Liaison Committee.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The House is grateful for next week's business and an indication of the business when we return. I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for implementing my suggestion last week that we bring forward the sitting hours on Tuesday.

Will there be a statement next week from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the future of Wembley, as his self-imposed deadline has expired and there is much speculation about the stadium's future? If we cannot have a statement, might oral Question 11 on Monday to the Secretary of State on the subject be taken at the end of Question Time, to allow an opportunity for further discussion?

Will the Foreign Secretary make a statement before we rise about Chechnya, where events are moving quickly, so that he can outline the diplomatic initiatives that he and other European leaders have taken to limit death and destruction?

While we are away, will the Government announce that 2000 is to be another year of delivery? If so, will they announce all the targets that they missed in 1999?

I see that, this time last year, my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) asked for the dates of the Easter and the Whitsun recess. I do not propose to push my luck, but for those hon. Members who like to plan ahead, is the right hon. Lady able to shine any light on the timing of the February constituency week? If she does not announce it today, the House will have to wait another month.

Finally, as this is the last business statement of the year, may I wish the right hon. Lady a merry Christmas and a bug-free new year? Those good wishes go to her staff, to Madam Speaker and to the staff of the House.

At the end of the last century, the House rose on 27 October for the Christmas recess, and returned on 30 January—a target, perhaps, for the Select Committee on Modernisation.

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his acknowledgement that we have brought forward the timing of business on Tuesday. I think that that will be for the convenience of the whole House.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about Wembley. I shall certainly draw his proposal to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. The right hon. Gentleman will know that those matters are still under consideration, and that—although the initial deadline has passed—further work and consideration of the outcome are being undertaken. I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend will be able on Monday to say anything further on those matters; but, as I said, I shall draw the right hon. Gentleman's proposal to his attention.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the Foreign Secretary will be making a statement on Chechnya. I am not aware of my right hon. Friend's intention to do so; as the right hon. Gentleman said, the situation is confused. However, I shall draw the request to my right hon. Friend's attention.

I shall pass over the partisan remark that the right hon. Gentleman clearly felt it necessary to make, and merely tell him that the Government are well on course to meeting the targets that we set ourselves, both this year and at the general election.

I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman the dates of the February week—or say whether there will be such a week—although I understand, and am very mindful of, hon. Members' wish to know well in advance. However, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, I have also to be mindful of the progress of business, which is something that we have to take into account, and sometimes carefully monitor—especially when we have debates on, for example, whether a message should be received from the Lords.

I accept and am happy to return the right hon. Gentleman's good wishes, and I appreciate them. I share the wishes that he has expressed to Madam Speaker and her staff and to all the staff of the House.

I was also most interested in, and entertained by, the parallel that the right hon. Gentleman drew with the end of the previous century and the length of the Christmas recess in that year. I trust that the parallel will be taken

on board by the many Opposition Members whose reaction to the announcement of any recess is to say that it is too long, unprecedentedly long, and an abuse of position by the Government. I hope that they have learned from the historical parallels.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): In the light of reports today that the Financial Services Authority is planning not to hold an inquiry into the mis-selling of mortgages, when can we debate early-day motion 11?

[*That this House is alarmed at the continuing high sales of endowment mortgages; agrees with the Consumers' Association that endowments are 'risky inflexible products which typically pay seven times the commission of repayment mortgages'; calls for legislation to end the hidden charges and high redemption charges in other mortgages; and urges speedy compensation for the victims of mis-selling and the establishment of a financial advice service that will be independent of the selling process.*]

There is abundant evidence that possibly millions of people have been mis-sold mortgages and that, if the inquiry is not held, they may be denied compensation.

We could also discuss the proposal that the Government should establish a website on which benchmark information—free of any need to make commissions—is given to the public. The general public have been using the NHS Direct website to gain information, and a financial advice website could both provide a valuable service and ensure that, for the first time ever, the public were able to receive advice entirely divorced from the need to earn commissions.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, which will be taken on board by the responsible Ministers. He also said that the Financial Services Authority has decided not to proceed with an investigation into mortgage mis-selling, but that is not entirely my understanding. I was under the impression that the FSA was still considering what action, if any, needed to be taken to improve standards. Nevertheless, as I said, I shall certainly draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friends.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): May I, on behalf of Liberal Democrat Members, offer season's greetings to the right hon. Lady, her staff and all Officers and Members of the House?

I also thank her for the business statement. We appreciate that the first week in January will be extremely busy. However, will she either make arrangements for the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to make a statement to the House on the prospectus that was issued this week on the Learning and Skills Council, or provide time for a debate? The relevant Bill will be introduced not in this place but in another place on 20 January. The decisions involve a £6 billion budget, but we shall not have an opportunity to discuss the prospectus before the orders are laid before the other House. That is a crucial issue for a statement or a debate.

Mrs. Beckett: We all recognise the importance of my right hon. Friend's proposals. The House will have a proper opportunity to consider them and will wish to look carefully at the issues. I cannot undertake to provide time for a special statement when our proposals will be in the public domain.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Neither my right hon. Friend nor I are into gesture politics, but the House of Commons has a long and honourable record of seeking to protect the human rights of those who are not British citizens. Before she goes on holiday, will she draw the attention of the Foreign Office, and possibly the Home Secretary, to the case, highlighted on "Newsnight" last night, of a Hungarian detective who, in seeking to investigate frightening scams in Hungary, has been personally attacked and subsequently arrested on a trumped-up charge? If Hungary is to be an applicant to join the European Community, it is time it was reminded that police investigations of specific crimes are fundamental and basic procedures that we expect applicant states to support.

Mrs. Beckett: I respect my hon. Friend's serious approach to politics and I take her point entirely. I was not familiar with the case that she has raised, but I shall ensure that her remarks are drawn to the attention of my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, as she requested.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to come to the House and explain why Mr. Alan Donnelly, the Labour Member of the European Parliament for North-East England who has resigned, will be automatically replaced by a Labour candidate who stood, but was not elected, at the European elections? Surely there should be a by-election so that the electorate of the north-east can choose the candidate whom they want to represent them.

Mrs. Beckett: I am not prepared to ask the Home Secretary to come to the House to reaffirm a decision that has already been made by the House.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Why has there been no mention so far in the Leader of the House's list of forthcoming attractions of a debate on the defence industry and Government policy towards it? Many thousands of my constituents work in the aerospace defence industry. They are very anxious to debate with Ministers the future of projects such as Meteor, the RAF's future heavy airlift capacity and the implications for British defence policy of the formation of BAE Systems. When might such a debate take place?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman the date for such a debate, but the Government are anxious to bring the defence White Paper before the House as soon as we can. We shall want to hear the views of the Select Committee on Defence before we have a debate in the House, but I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we shall have a debate as early as we can.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): In this year of supposed delivery by the Government, will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on prescriptions given by health authorities? How does she advise me to

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reply to an elderly constituent of mine from Ashbourne whose husband is suffering from Alzheimer's disease? She says:

"the doctor cannot prescribe the drug Aricept which may help him because the Southern Derbyshire Health Authority will not fund it. I am told that if we were over in border in Nottinghamshire that we would be able to obtain this drug."

When will my constituent be able to get the drug to help her husband to overcome his debilitating disease?

Mrs. Beckett: I have every sympathy for those who care for people suffering from Alzheimer's. It is a terrible disease, and the stress that it places, particularly on the carers and families of sufferers, is extreme. However, the effectiveness of Aricept—as well as its availability—is contested, and it is not necessarily suitable for all cases. *[Interruption.]* I wish the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) would not twitter—it is very distracting. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence is studying the matter, and the Government will give its report the most serious attention.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): In wishing the Leader of the House the compliments of the impending season, recognising that she is a fair-minded person and hoping that she is a far-sighted person too, may I ask her to agree that it would be entirely appropriate, at the dawn of a new millennium, if the Government were to provide for a day's debate on the Floor of the House on the problems facing our earth in the immediate future? Given that the population of our world has trebled in the last 70 years, and is expected to increase by a further 4 billion in the next 50 years; given that three quarters of the world's population is on a spectrum varying between under-nourishment and starvation; given that the land on which we can grow food is diminishing, and that our seas are being depleted of fishing stocks, does she agree—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. We cannot have a debate just now.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I blame the Government for all those things.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) will always blame the Government—including for the increase in population, for which we have some responsibility on a minor scale.

The issues raised by the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) are serious and fundamental, and they will be aired in a variety of forums in the new term of Parliament which begins after Christmas. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for an early debate on the matter, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that Environment questions will be held on the second day back.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): May I, too, wish the Leader of the House a merry Christmas and a happy new millennium? Will she confirm that it is a cardinal principle of any self-respecting Parliament that there should be equal access to the Houses of Parliament for all hon. Members? Can we start the new millennium as we mean to go on? Will she give a commitment that, on millennium night, as the minutes tick away to midnight, no member of the Government or any official or officer for whom the right hon. Lady is responsible will be enjoying the facilities of this House while the building is closed to all hon. Members? Does she agree that it is a principle of a good general that he does not reserve perks to himself that are denied to the poor bloody infantry?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman—may I return his good wishes?—will be aware that access to the House is a matter for Madam Speaker, and that she has given her ruling on this matter. I cannot recall whether the hon. Gentleman was referring to the entire course of the evening. There will be a reception at some point for winners of the millennium awards, who are not in any way, shape or form members of the Government. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not be so churlish as to deny them that recognition. I am afraid I am not aware of what other members of the Government are doing for the rest of the evening.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the Leader of the House arrange for an early debate so that we can discuss how to make more accountable to this House Ministers who are sitting in the other place? The right hon. Lady will know that there are three Ministers in the other place who exercise important responsibilities: the Attorney-General, Lord Williams of Mostyn; Lord Falconer; and the latest Transport Minister, Lord Macdonald. I am not attacking them as individuals—no doubt they are splendid folk. However, these individuals exercise authority of considerable importance which touches on our constituents, and it is profoundly unsatisfactory that they are not accountable to elected Members. Can we have a debate as to how we can improve accountability in a democratic state?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Remember Lord Young and Lord Carrington.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right: there is nothing unprecedented about the holders of senior positions being in the House of Lords. He reminds me that a Foreign Secretary in the Thatcher Government sat in the Lords. I rather believe that Lady Chalker may have been Minister for Transport; she was certainly an Overseas Development Minister. There are many precedents.

Mr. Mackinlay: Lord Cockfield.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is unnecessary for the hon. Gentleman to interrupt. The Leader of the House is doing well on her own.

Mrs. Beckett: That is very kind of you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, although I must admit that I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

Not for the first time, not only the sense of history but the memory of Conservative Members is rather failing them.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I have no wish to be unnecessarily partisan, but necessity in these questions is a matter of fine judgment.

Will the Leader of the House acknowledge that street crime in London is on the increase, police morale is falling and there is widespread concern about the police strategy? Dr. Marian Fitzgerald's research produced a telling report criticising the strategy in London, for which the Government must ultimately take responsibility. Will the Leader of the House accede to her request for action, which is supported by victims, even by some former criminals and by the wider public? Given that this is literally a matter of life and limb, will she arrange an urgent debate to allow us to ask why, in the Government's supposed year of delivery, all that they are delivering in London is rising crime and falling police morale?

Mrs. Beckett: Again, Conservative Members' memories are failing them. Crime rose steadily throughout their period in office. We all greatly regret that. I am aware of the Fitzgerald report, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is carefully studying the issues that it raises. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a very early debate on the matter, although I have no doubt that the House will want to return to it and study it carefully.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): The Leader of the House will recall that I asked last week whether she would make available time for the Law Officers to come to the House to make a statement about the legal options open to this country in the light of the continued ban of our beef by France. Nothing has been forthcoming. The possibilities include injunctive relief. Our farmers have suffered another week of their desperate plight and I am looking for a response—please—so that we can tell our farmers what options we have. Forget a year of delivery: a week of delivery would be very nice, thank you.

Mrs. Beckett: I can only tell the hon. Gentleman what I told him last time: there will be oral questions during the first week back, and it is very clear where we stand legally, as the French Government are being taken to court and have been given a tight timetable within which to respond.

Mr. O'Brien: Injunctive relief.

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of an injunction, and I have no doubt that that point has been taken on board. All Governments from time to time deal with issues that come before the European Court. I have not taken the mind of my colleagues on this matter, but it occurs to me that there may be times when the British Government would not want a rush to an injunction, and I can well imagine Conservative Members complaining bitterly if such a step were taken. All the factors must be carefully considered and I have no doubt that the Law Officers are indeed considering them.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): A few moments ago, we had a very serious statement on the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights on the Thompson and Venables case; but that is not the only ruling issued by the court today. Has the Leader of the House received a request from the Secretary of State for Social Security to make an urgent statement to the House about the Government being overruled on the payment of winter fuel benefit to men over 60? That will cost the Government an extra £30 million.

Mr. Forth: The taxpayer, not the Government.

Mr. Fabricant: Indeed, the taxpayer. One and a half million people will benefit, which I suppose is the good news. Far more seriously, it seems that the judgment is part of a major campaign, the ultimate objective of which is equal state pension ages for men and women. If the European Court of Human Rights accepts that, it will cost the Government and the taxpayer billions of pounds. When will a statement be made; and when will the Secretary of State apologise to the House for having passed legislation just 11 months ago that has so quickly been overruled?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman's point is rather silly, because no Secretary of State can introduce legislation on the assumption that no court will ever make changes in it. However, the hon. Gentleman's initial remarks raised a serious issue. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security had not been aware that the judgment was to be made public this morning; otherwise, he would have made arrangements to inform the House. A parliamentary question has now been tabled and will be answered on the next sitting day. My right hon. Friend is considering urgently how he can inform right hon. and hon. Members of the judgment.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Has not one product of the so-called year of delivery been the delivery of a parody of a democratic electoral system for European elections? Out of 89 MEPs elected last June, only 29 were Labour. Within six months, two of them have voluntarily stepped down and there is no prospect of a by-election at which the electorate could punish the Labour party for such irresponsible behaviour. The Leader of the House has already said that the Home Secretary will not make a statement about the disgraceful and undemocratic system that has been imposed, but will the relevant Foreign Office Minister make a statement about what the Labour party is playing at when two of its derisory total of 29 MEPs have stepped down in this opportunistic and dishonourable way?

Mrs. Beckett: I can only conclude that it hurts Conservative Members deeply that the Labour Government are engaged in a year of delivery—that is obviously the line of the week—with the arrival of the national minimum wage, the working families tax credit and the greatest ever increase in child benefit. The Conservatives opposed all those measures and would remove them. It is unwise of the Conservatives to keep reminding the public of those facts, but that is only one of the unwise decisions that they have made.

It was the House's decision to introduce the system for the European elections, and much nonsense was talked about how it was unprecedented for people to have only one group of candidates to choose from. That is precisely the system that we use in our general elections, in which we do not have a range of Conservative candidates—for

[Mrs. Beckett]

example—to choose from. Indeed, when we do, as in the mayor of London election, the Conservatives make a real mess of it.

Dr. Lewis: By-elections.

Mrs. Beckett: I am coming to that point. I understand the enthusiasm for by-elections among Conservative Members and the news media, but I have never observed that that enthusiasm is shared by the public. In any event, there is no ministerial responsibility for the resignations.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): After the welcome statement from the Prime Minister's spokesman yesterday about a U-turn on the Government's delivery of a fox hunting policy, in that the Bill to be introduced by the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) was doomed to fail because of lack of parliamentary time, may we have a statement from the Home Secretary? The Leader of the House will remember that we had a written answer on the last day of the previous Session that said that the Government would give time to such a Bill. Given that the millennium dome is now infested with foxes, the Government's U-turn is welcome, but may we have a statement to explain the change of policy?

Mrs. Beckett: Yet again the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. There is no change of policy, and I know that that will be a deep disappointment to him. The Government have undertaken to provide time for a private Member's Bill, but we have made it plain that we wish first to see and digest the report on the impact of hunting from the Burns committee. When that has been received and presented to Parliament, the Government will be prepared to try to find time to assist a private Member's Bill, should a suitable opportunity arise.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): May I offer the Leader of the House the best wishes of the season?

On 21 September 1995, the present Prime Minister said, as reported in the *Financial Times*, that he had no plans to increase tax. Since then, we have had a deluge of taxes amounting to £40.7 billion, according to the Library, which is an impartial source respected on both sides of the House. Before the Select Committee on the Treasury, the Chancellor admitted that taxes had gone up, and we had a spirited debate at Treasury Question Time in which other Treasury Ministers expressed doubts about the Library's figures. I trust the Library figures.

Will the Leader of the House deliver to the House the present of a full debate on the Government's increases in taxation during this so-called year of delivery?

Mrs. Beckett: I really do not understand why the Conservative party continues to make that claim when it is quite evident that, before, during and since the election, it has done nothing but complain about the windfall tax. Indeed, before the election, it made much—

Mr. Paterson: Table B1!

Mrs. Beckett: It is no good the hon. Gentleman shouting and waving tables. Before the election, Conservative Members endlessly referred to the fact that we, as the then Opposition, refused to commit ourselves to anything beyond not raising the rate of income tax for standard rate payers and for higher rate payers. So it is no good their now trying to convince the British people that they were in some way unaware of—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) will behave himself. He has just been called to ask a question, but then he misbehaves. He was not misbehaving before he was called.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that the hon. Gentleman is a serial misbehaver.

The hon. Gentleman's main point was to ask me to find time for a special debate. I simply draw to his attention something that he may have overlooked; there will be such a debate on Tuesday 21 December.

Mr. Forth: In the interests of open government and to allow the Prime Minister the opportunity to set the record straight, will the Leader of the House provide an urgent opportunity for the Prime Minister to come to the House to explain what that nice Mr. Jospin really said to him about beef, and particularly about Scottish beef? That would also allow the Prime Minister to explain to us what he apparently did not say to the First Minister in Scotland. It might even give the First Minister, who is still the distinguished right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), the opportunity to explain to the House what he did not hear from the Prime Minister about what the Prime Minister had heard from the Prime Minister of France.

This is a very worrying matter. It touches not only on the intimate relationship that the Prime Minister claims to have with his European counterparts, but on the whole matter of devolution and what on earth is going on between the Prime Minister and his Scottish First Minister.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman has not been reading the *Daily Mail* with his usual assiduous attention—otherwise, he would have seen in yesterday's edition the remarks of the president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, who said:

"At no stage . . . were there any serious and detailed proposals put forward by France to allow Scottish beef to return to the French market."

He added, as reported in *The Independent*:

"This can only be a blatant attempt by the French to shift attention away from their unwarranted and illegal action and to attempt to drive a wedge between different parts of the United Kingdom."

I rest my case.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Twitter away!

Miss Kirkbride: Quite so. If the right hon. Lady has seen page 2 of *The Sun* today, she will know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has been

crowned by *The Sun* as king of the Commons. That follows the Prime Minister's risible performance yesterday when, in response to my right hon. Friend's questions, he sought to justify his failure in the year of delivery. Clearly, the business of next week has been so organised that the Prime Minister does not have to appear again to make a further risible performance. However, will the Leader of the House consider holding Prime Minister's Question Time on Tuesday next week, so that my right hon. Friend can have his crown reconfirmed—or is the Prime Minister frit?

Mrs. Beckett: I was of course present, as always, at Prime Minister's Question Time yesterday. I thought that there was a risible performance; it was that of the Leader of the Opposition, who fell way below even those low standards that he has occasionally set—

Mr. McLoughlin: You cannot be serious.

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, I am serious: it was pathetic.

I have not seen page 2 of *The Sun* and the hon. Lady should probably be grateful that the Leader of the Opposition does not appear on page 3. However, I recall that the right hon. Gentleman recently made newspaper readers aware of his top 10 favourite jokes. He is good at jokes, and they are what he should stick to.

ESTIMATES DAY

[1st Allotted Day, 1st Part]

VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2000–01

Class III, Vote 6

Aviation Safety

[Relevant documents: Fourteenth Report of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99, Aviation Safety, HC 275, and the Government's response thereto, Cm. 4539; and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Annual Report 1999: The Government's Expenditure Plans 1999–2002, Cm. 4204.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That a sum, not exceeding £511,039,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2001 for expenditure by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on support to nationalised industries; grants to Railtrack, British Rail, London Transport, Docklands Light Railway, DoA Ltd; MRPS grant; payments in respect of expenditure relating to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link; expenditure connected with the privatisation of British Rail Business; other consultancies; expenditure relating to Commission for Integrated Transport; capital expenditure by transport industries funded by EC grants; railway industry and National Freight Company pensions funds; National Freight Company travel concessions; rebate of fuel duty to bus operators; ports and shipping services; Royal Travel; miscellaneous services; civil aviation services; international aviation services; transport security; freight grants, and expenditure associated with the non rail privatisation programme.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

1.55 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Aviation safety is not a subject that can ever be treated lightly. Since the creation of the aviation industry, this country has had an extremely good safety record. Britain has built up a worldwide reputation for understanding the needs and priorities involved in keeping passengers and pilots safe.

The Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs undertook a detailed investigation of aviation safety. We did not want to disturb the industry's good reputation, nor to encourage the public to believe that there had been obvious instances of backsliding from the standards that we have always maintained. However, it would be foolish to pretend that United Kingdom Governments have always had clear and coherent policies with regard to aviation. Indeed, one of the worries is that, for some years, the House of Commons has not been treated to clear guidelines about the future of the aviation industry.

The Select Committee set out to look closely at all aspects of the working of the safety regulations, in general aviation and in the commercial sector. We were very worried that changes that might be taking place in the near future might cause details of aspects that we considered essential to be, if not ignored, then at least overlooked.

The Committee submitted a very detailed and carefully researched report. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), will not misunderstand me when I say that I find the tone of the Government's response rather disappointing. That may reflect one of the problems raised in the report. We were concerned about what can only be described as the complacency of the aviation industry, and it is important to spell out exactly what we meant by that.

The Committee took a lot of information and evidence from all sectors of the industry. We were worried—there is no point in pretending otherwise—that the industry was not prepared to look too closely at its behaviour and its future, in case the public got the idea that a severe and real problem existed. We were careful to make it clear that it was not the Committee's aim or intention to put that idea in people's minds, as it did not accord with our experience.

However, we considered that the industry would be underestimating its own position if it gave the impression that it was content with the status quo and implied that, as everything was already perfect, there was no need for close examination of safety matters. I had hoped that Ministers would be prepared to read the report in a way that would enable them to take on board some of the difficulties that we discovered in our researches.

I want to put it on record that the Committee is satisfied that the United Kingdom is fortunate in having very professional pilots, engineers and—above all—air traffic control officers. The safety ethos is absolutely fundamental for those people, but the Committee is worried about relationships inside the industry. They may be a little too convivial. Close monitoring by Government institutions is essential and is in the best interests of the industry itself.

Some difficulties could be dealt with by the clear separation of the safety regulation group from the Civil Aviation Authority into an independent, free-standing operation, as the Select Committee recommends. At present, they operate closely and, obviously, the industry must co-operate on a day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, the Select Committee believes that it is essential that there should be a clear division between National Air Traffic Services and the CAA and that that division can be seen to be operating.

I should like to take up other points in the Government reply. Would my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary like to give me an answer to the question of virtual airlines? The Government seemed to say that, in the aviation industry, some people would wet lease aircraft and then be prepared to subcontract every aspect of the work, but that was not a real problem because there was not too much evidence that happens. Can my hon. Friend give the number of aircraft that are operated on behalf of United Kingdom airlines which are flying for hire and reward out of the UK, which are not on the UK register and which are subject to UK safety oversight or the flight operations inspectorate review? Those aircraft will carry British citizens, so we have a right to say to the Government that it is not good enough for them to say that they are not aware of anybody carrying out that particular operation, so it is not a problem. The operation of such aircraft is a virtual airline, even as defined by the Government, and it is tremendously important that we look closely at this. Air Foyle and Heavylift operate Russian-registered cargo aircraft. They are interesting examples of the sort of problem that concerns us.

Can the Minister advise us how many recommendations the air accidents investigation branch has made in the past 10 years and how many have been implemented or subject to an airworthiness notice by the CAA Airworthiness Requirement Board? How many of those relate to the outcome of the Manchester 737 accident? We ask these questions because we believe that they are relevant to the Committee's work. Can the Minister tell us whether the AAIB now has all the qualified staff and resources that it will need to meet the size of the task that it has in a developing and increasingly active industry?

The Minister will know that we raised the subject of helicopter inspection because we were concerned that it seemed that some inspectors might have several skills but not necessarily those connected with the helicopter industry. The Minister will know that helicopters are different aircraft with different needs and responsibilities. Would my hon. Friend accept an inspector with a public service vehicle licence being drafted into the railway system to operate as part of the railway inspectorate? I do not think that he would. Therefore, I should like to know that all those involved in helicopter operations inspection are qualified helicopter pilots with substantial helicopter operating experience. As my hon. Friend will know, unfortunately there have been a number of incidents which have raised considerable worries about what happens with helicopters, and the public need to be reassured.

We come now to our perennial friend, the enroute centre at Swanwick. Is the Minister really going to tell us that the centre will open during the winter of 2001–02? Will the specifications be exact? Will the centre be fully operational, and will it provide the necessary increase in capacity? The aviation industry has a greater rate of growth than almost any other in the country. It is shooting ahead, and will continue to do so. Given the pressures on air traffic controllers and air space, the functional systems will be crucial. Unless we can be sure that those systems will operate in the way that will best protect the interests of the general public, we will have some very real worries.

I want to ask about foreign aircraft inspections. Does the increase in the level of inspections include inspections of aircraft that are operated on behalf of United Kingdom airlines flying for hire and reward out of the UK which are not on our register and subject to UK safety oversight?

There are difficulties in relation to planes overflying the centre of our cities. I tabled some questions to the Minister, and expected to be told that cases of aircraft flying over central London on their way to Heathrow with one engine inoperable numbered one or two at most. I was stunned to find out that there had been 17 such cases. I hope that the Department is investigating this with some vigour and is not prepared to rest on the assumption that planes can fly safely with one engine. I am happy to know that a two-engine plane can fly with one engine, but if it is also running low on fuel, as has happened in some instances, many people in this capital city will say that that is not ideal.

There have also been instances of very large aircraft landing at Heathrow with almost empty tanks. I would like to think that those are isolated incidents but, if they are not, I hope that the Minister will be able to tell me rather more than he did in his answer to my question. It is not good enough to say to the House of Commons, "It doesn't happen very often." The one time that it does go wrong, a number of lives may be at risk, and we may have good reason to regret that any aircraft was able to operate in such conditions over our capital city. I shall not second-guess aircraft commanders, who take the final decision on safety but there are very real worries. I hope that we shall be given information this afternoon that is more positive than hitherto.

We were concerned about the training of engineers in the aviation industry. Again, I am sorry to say that the reply was rather complacent. In the past, aircraft engineers were very specialised and were trained accordingly. Unfortunately, evidence to the Select Committee showed that we are losing a whole generation of engineers. Many of them are retiring and are not being replaced. We would like to know that the Government are confronting the situation and are not content simply to say that it is a matter for the industry. It will not be a matter for the industry if we suddenly find ourselves with operational difficulties. We should consider not only the training of aircraft engineers but how we can bring more people in to the industry and encourage them to maintain the high standards that we have had in the past.

The issue also has a knock-on effect on training people to fly. The United States, which has a very large industry, has the advantage of extremely good weather in many parts. It can encourage people from all over the globe to go there and receive aviation training; not only are the standards of training different from ours, but the cost is much lower. Since we have the expertise, I hope that we can come up with practical ways to lower costs for people who want to fly and to encourage them to remain within the UK.

I shall not go into detail on the aircraft cabin safety problems mentioned in our report. However, the Government responses continually tell us either that the Government are thinking about a particular difficulty or that, for one or another reason, they do not think a point of any importance. Cabin safety has been dismissed as capable of producing neither any new research nor any response. That seems cavalier and unimaginative. If there are problems with aircraft and air cabin safety, the Government should examine them, rather than saying that they have read what the Committee has said, but are not impressed and need not worry further.

The House of Commons entrusts Select Committees with the role of scrutinising industries sponsored by Whitehall Departments because the detailed examination of problems likely to arise is something that Select Committees do best. We are able to question Ministers, to raise detailed problems with those who give evidence and to call a wide cross-section of people before us, as we did when we compiled the report. On general aviation, commercial flying and helicopters, we considered all the difficulties that we foresaw, and we have attempted to produce a report that is not sensational, that does not seek a hysterical response but that demands serious answers.

We were disappointed with the quality of the Government's response. We felt that our work merited rather less complacency and rather more vigour. For the first time in many years, a Government have said that they will have a policy on aviation and produce a detailed document. They say that they will treat the industry with seriousness that it has not been given in the past. That is both essential and welcome, but there are matters for the Minister to consider in the interim.

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

We value the work being done in his Department, but the appendices to my Committee's report contain, at page 192, a simple graph from the Boeing company titled "We need to continuously improve aviation safety". That graph clearly shows the gap already opening up. We need to close it. We are therefore right to say to the Minister and everyone else involved that the industry may be very safe, but it must not be complacent or assume that no change is needed. The industry must create inspectorates that are seen to be independent and must address whether they have sufficient and properly trained staff. It must also address whether the independent safety authority will be properly funded, and it must do it now.

The Minister, like the rest of us, saw the public response to a savage train accident recently. We can tell those involved in it that accidents are rare—that, happily, they are not a common occurrence—but the public responded by telling the Government to take difficult safety decisions, and to do it now. The public did not want safety left to the commercial end of the industry. If that is true of railways, it is triply, quadruply, eternally true of the aviation industry. I hope that my hon. Friend can give us more heart today than he did in his response to my Committee.

2.15 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is a great pleasure and privilege to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), as it is to serve behind her on the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. She and I do not always agree, but we enjoy our exchanges across the Committee Room table. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) to the Front Bench. His Back-Bench colleagues very much look forward to hearing what he has to say in an important, if slightly ill-attended, debate.

The debate is important because aviation in the United Kingdom is at present 100 per cent. safe. It was interesting to hear the hon. Lady raise the difference between perception and reality. We must say as clearly and frequently as we can that there is no lack of safety in the UK. The aeroplanes, pilots, airports and air traffic controllers display no slippage of safety. We probably have the safest air travel in the world, as several people who gave evidence to the Committee acknowledged.

None the less, two points must be made. Perception may differ from reality. As the hon. Lady said, that is certainly true of the railways. We must pay as much attention to ensuring that the travelling public know that travel is safe as we do to making it so. A good example of the difference between perception and reality is the Y2K problem. I understand from airlines that there has been a significant decline in air travel scheduled for the millennium evening and the next day. People are concerned about Y2K even though anyone who knows anything about it is convinced that there will be no danger of any kind to the travelling public on 1 January 2000.

Secondly, in saying how safe air transport is, one must leave no room for complacency. If some of the changes recommended in the report are not made, British aviation may not remain as safe as it is today. It is important that the Committee held its inquiry and produced a valuable report in which nearly every word is eminently sensible. Like the hon. Lady, I have large reservations about the quality of the Government's response, and I look forward to hearing the Minister explain the thin and disappointing nature of some of his responses.

I shall focus on two or three air safety issues rather than the generality of the report. As the hon. Lady said, air traffic has increased hugely during the past few years. Over the next 10 years, it is predicted to increase by 50 per cent. That prediction applies particularly in the south-east of England. When I worked at the former Department of the Environment, there was a constant cry of Rucatse—runway capacity in the south-east. The subject continually appeared in the Secretary of State's red box, and there were constant discussions about what we could do about runway capacity. That problem remains to be dealt with. We must find more capacity, or our high safety standards will, without question, be compromised.

A related matter to which the hon. Lady made little reference was the future of the National Air Traffic Services. Without a vibrant and successful NATS, our high standards may be compromised. Already, there are signs that overload on controllers has grown. The volume and complexity of traffic has increased overload to 49 incidents this year—double the number in the previous year. Overload is increasing, and if Swanwick is not in place in good time, that increase will continue.

It will interesting to hear what the Minister has to say about Swanwick. His predecessors offered dates for when Swanwick would be up and running, but these dates always slipped. The latest date given, I think, was April 2002, and it would be interesting to hear the Minister confirm that, although he would doubtless be putting his job on the line by doing so. He looks as if he may be about to intervene to confirm that date, or not.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Many of my predecessors were members of the Government whom he supported, and many of the problems at Swanwick arose during their time in office. I hope that he will bear that in mind when he deals with the problem, and that he will do so in a mature and responsible way.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the Minister for pointing that out. I try to do everything in a mature and responsible way, so I shall follow the precedent.

I acknowledge that the situation is as the Minister describes. When the project was launched, the completion date was set for 1990 or thereabouts, and it has gone back and back. That has happened under both Governments.

I always try to avoid party political splits and divisions on the Select Committee, as my colleagues across the Floor will doubtless agree, and try to address the issues in as broad a bipartisan way as we can. I prefer to leave out the party politics for the moment, although one or two of the topics that I shall cover later may contain a small element of party politics.

We need to know when Swanwick will be up and running, and what effect that will have on air safety in England. What will happen to NATS? The Government claim to have come up with some clever public-private

partnership. The truth is that no one has the remotest idea of what it is or how it will work. It seems that 48 per cent. will be in the private sector, 5 per cent. with the workers and the balance with the Government.

Who will control the company? Who will run it? Who will have responsibility for employment matters? Who will take the risk if the company goes down? Who will benefit if the company makes a large profit? Who will make the decisions? All that is unclear. The Government display a split personality with regard to privatisation, as in the case of DERA—the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. They cannot decide whether to privatise it or not—apparently not, at present. On the future of London Underground, one moment the Government are doing complicated deals with Railtrack, and the next minute they are not, for reasons best known to themselves.

I am puzzled by the figures that the Government produced in the explanatory notes to the Transport Bill, which will receive its Second Reading on Monday. According to paragraph 233 on page 40, the partial sale of NATS

"could raise in the region of £350 million."

Of that, £300 million goes to pay off NATS's debts. That leaves a balance of £50 million. Of that £50 million, as I understand paragraph 233—if the Government are wrong again, perhaps the Minister will correct me—an astonishing £35 million goes to my former colleagues in the City of London in fees of one sort or another, apparently leaving a net figure of £15 million for the privatisation of NATS. If the Minister wants to correct that, I dare say he will. It will be interesting to know how much money the Treasury intends to net from the sale of NATS.

Mr. Mullin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene again. He is probably aware—but perhaps he is not—that I and my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport attended the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee last week. We were grilled on that topic very ably, as one would expect from my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). The hon. Gentleman was not present, nor was any member of the Conservative party. That would have been the place to get the answers to some of his questions.

Mr. Gray: The Minister has not answered the point, but no doubt he will do so when he winds up. On that day, we had an Opposition day debate on transport in the Chamber, in which I spoke. I took the view that my duties in the Chamber overrode my duties to the Select Committee. If the Minister cares to consult *Hansard* for that day, he will discover that I made a reasonable speech on that occasion. That is the reason why we were not present in the Select Committee. An Opposition day debate in the Chamber seemed to be an occasion of some importance, although perhaps the Minister does not recognise that. *[Interruption.]* I asked him a direct question—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Minister does not have licence to shout across the Floor. He may not do that.

Mr. Gray: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The House will have noticed that I made a particular point about the net take from NATS. The Minister intervened, apparently to give me the answer, but all he could do was to make a cheap party political point about the fact that I was not present in the Select Committee because I was doing my duty in the Chamber. That is a strange way for a junior Minister to behave, but the House will have noted what he did.

Because of the way in which the risk transference may or may not occur in the proposed privatisation, my reading of the explanatory notes to the Transport Bill is that the net take to the Treasury will be £15 million. If that is an incorrect reading, the Minister may care to explain what will happen to the £300 million debt, who will take that debt on, how it will be transferred and what the net take to the Treasury will be.

All of us who are considering the privatisation of NATS will be interested to hear that. If the Treasury will achieve a large take and spend the money on something useful—in the transport sphere, I hope, as is claimed—perhaps that will encourage us to go along with the Government's rather muddled proposal. If, however, the Treasury take is only £15 million, we must ask why the Government propose to carry out the privatisation. I expect that some Labour Back Benchers may ask the same question.

The privatisation of NATS is the first issue on which the Government must be straightforward. The Minister will come up with the notion of the golden share. He will tell us how important the golden share is, that it means that the Government will not lose control of NATS, and that we can be certain that NATS will remain a British organisation. Will he tell the House what he makes of the European Commission's current challenge on the ownership of golden shares in other companies, particularly BAA?

Will the Government be able to have the golden share? Will they be able to guarantee that, for example, the French and German companies currently looking at NATS will not be allowed to take control of Britain's airspace? Before the general election, the Labour party went to great lengths to assure us that one thing that was not for sale was Britain's airspace. Like many of their other early pledges, that one seems to have gone down the tubes.

NATS is the first matter of concern to me. The second is Europe. There are various aspects worth examining. We wholly support the notion of co-operation with other European states on air traffic control. We would be mad if we did not. Of course we want to make certain that all 28 European countries that take part in Eurocontrol co-operate in controlling our airspace.

That is quite different from doing what is proposed if the European Union becomes part of Eurocontrol. That is not co-operation, but integration. It implies that a European body has integrated control of the airspaces. That means giving up BAA-NATS control of British airspace to a European organisation—a sort of federalism of the air. Many commentators on the proposal have said exactly that. One of them said that, if European countries have given up control of the land borders, they should also give up control of the air borders.

I am sorry to introduce a party political point, but the Conservative party firmly believes that we should keep our land borders and our air borders, not least because our standards of air traffic control are in many respects a great

[Mr. Gray]

deal better than those of some of our European partners. Like any other such integration, the lowest common denominator will be the standard. There will be co-ordination across Europe at the lowest level of any European country. If there were such co-operation across Europe, there would unquestionably be a lowering of British standards.

A similar argument applies to the Joint Aviation Authority, which seeks to ensure uniform safety standards across the member states. At present, its decisions are not legally binding on the member states, although there is a suggestion that that may become the case. The House will be aware that the UK Flight Safety Committee gave evidence to the Select Committee and described the JAA as a camel train which is

"as quick as the slowest camel in the train."

That is quite a good description of the averaging down to the lowest common denominator that I described with regard to Eurocontrol. It is unfortunate that the UK's excellent record in aviation safety may be forced lower to fit in with that of our European partners.

My greatest concern relating to Europe involves the proposed European Aviation Safety Authority—EASA—which would operate using qualified majority voting. If that happened, debates such as this in the Palace of Westminster on the subject of air safety would no longer have any purpose. Parliament would no longer have its say over air safety across Europe. That would be handed over to a European organisation with qualified majority voting, and we might find ourselves, as we so often do in a European context, in a minority of one. I am happy to be in a minority of one so long as we have a veto. However, qualified majority voting would prevent us from vetoing our European partners' proposals.

The Select Committee considered that the UK aviation industries proud record might be undermined by full JAA membership and possibly by EASA, and recommended that the Government should clarify whether EASA would have legal powers to impose its proposed standards. It was disappointing that the Government's response to the report did not answer that point. I hope that, when the Minister replies today, he will say whether EASA will have such powers.

I have several concerns about non-European operators in the air. Responsibility for inspecting foreign-registered aircraft which land in the UK—ramp checks—lies with the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Only 59 ramp checks were carried out in 1997–98 and 63 in 1998–99. The Government have generously said that the number of ramp checks must be increased and that 200 foreign planes coming into the UK will be checked. Recently, planes landing at Heathrow were found to have insufficient fuel on board, and that is the sort of thing that would be found by a ramp check. However, set against the 1,762,820—nearly 2 million—air transport movements through Britain in 1998, those 200 ramp checks are wildly insufficient. That is a matter of great concern to my constituents in Wiltshire and even more so to people in the capital.

I wrote to the noble Lord Macdonald, who I understand is responsible for transport matters in the other place. It is sad that he cannot answer for transport matters in this place. It is odd that English transport should be controlled by a Scotsman in the other place. Incidentally, he is the fourth Scotsmen to deal with English transport matters—

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am rather amused that the hon. Gentleman, who occasionally tells us that he is a Scot, should find it so annoying that other Scots have positions of some importance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that hon. Members will not start criticising the Scots.

Mr. Gray: You and I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and other Scots who run this part of England, are none the less elected, in my case by the English and in your case by the Scots. Lord MacDonald is not elected at all and yet, curiously, is pontificating on English matters.

I raised a constituency case with the noble Lord concerning the safety standards of foreign carriers operating into the UK, and he said that civil airlines are required to comply with the "minimum safety standards". We are not asking foreign carriers to aim high and try to do as well as British carriers; we require foreign carriers to comply only with the absolute minimum. That is particularly worrying.

That matter was raised with me by my constituent, Mr. Stokes, of Hullavington. He quoted the worrying statistic that Ryanair, an Irish airline, currently landing in the UK, employs 18 Serbian pilots. It is curious that an Irish airline not governed by our high standards should employ Serbian pilots. That was apparently the case during the Kosovan war when we were at war with Serbia. None the less, we allowed Serbian pilots to land at our airports. That is bizarre and I hope that the Minister will tell us how that can happen and what can be done to prevent it from happening again, perhaps during an even more serious war in the future. The then Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), wrote to me stating:

"there are no legal reasons why these pilots should not be employed in the UK."

When we are at war with Serbia, Serbian pilots should be prevented from operating in the UK. If the Minister cannot answer my questions, perhaps he will consider changing the regulations so that such a situation does not arise again.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich referred to a number of matters to which the Minister should reply. One concerned the width of the aisle through the forward bulkhead in the Boeing 737. Coming from a vaguely military background, I have always been puzzled why, when soldiers travel by plane—by crab air, as the RAF is called in the Army—they always face the back of the plane because it is safest, yet civilians always face forward. Why is that?

It is important constantly to reiterate that British air travel has the highest standards in the world, and we must keep it that way. Sorting out the botched job of NATS involves a consideration of whether we are lowering standards by palling up with the Europeans on these matters, and a general consideration of what we can do with regard to runway capacity in the south-east. Such considerations are important if we are to continue to be seen as the safest air carriers in the world. My concern is

that the Government's response to our carefully worded and thought through report does not satisfy us on that point. Many will listen to what the Minister says in his reply extremely carefully. The Government's response to the report did not give us such satisfaction, so I hope that the Minister will find it in his heart to do so today.

2.36 pm

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) dealt with some matters on which I want to concentrate. However, given the situation, of which he is aware, my speech may have a slightly different slant.

I was pleased to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said. With her usual penetrating insight, she focused attention on a significant area of the debate which the Minister must answer this afternoon. The UK has had an excellent aviation safety record to date, but we might have taken it for granted for too long, and public confidence may not be retained.

Hearing the Deputy Prime Minister's welcome statement this week that there is to be an additional £80 billion for transport, the public may wonder why, for only another £1 billion, air traffic control cannot be maintained in the public sector. I wonder whether the public have worked that formula out. We are talking in real terms of only a small amount of money being returned to the Government—a profit of some 7 per cent.—so it is strange that we should be moving down the uncertain road of this public-private partnership.

Like you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I travel fairly regularly on the shuttle, and you will know that much frustration is caused by the delays at Heathrow on a Monday morning. That it why it is important that we should hear from the Minister this afternoon just when Swanwick will be up and running. More importantly, we need to know when Prestwick will be given the go ahead. Since I entered the House in 1992, there have been many uncertainties about the Prestwick building programme, so one way or the other we need to know when that programme will go ahead. Both sites must become operational at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): Does my hon. Friend understand the frustrations of my constituents and the many employees at the Scottish centre at Prestwick about the continuing delays there which started when the previous Government questioned the two-centre strategy and then instituted a botched PFI project? Does he agree that the continuing delays are causing intense frustration and worry in Scotland?

Mr. Donohoe: Yes. My hon. Friend is a great champion of getting that building programme under way. As a neighbouring Member, I receive a great deal of representation from air traffic controllers at Prestwick. They are frustrated because the programme has not gone ahead and is not already in place. Given the amount of time that has elapsed between the announcement, with all its information about the future, it is amazing that, in 1999, as we move into a new millennium, not a single sod of soil has been cut on the site to enable the programme to go ahead.

Another comparison that is made with the proposed public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services is the privatisation of British Airways and BAA. Yet there is no comparison between British Airways, which competes with British Midland—and, dare I say it, Ryanair—and air traffic control, a service in which there cannot be competition. Let us hope that there is no competition; clearly, NATS should continue to be a monopoly. It is disgusting that we are considering taking it outside the public sector. My view is based on safety considerations and the public perception of those matters. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich mentioned the recent accident at Paddington in that context. The public should be accorded the respect that they deserve.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I endorse my hon. Friend's comments about the mind of the public. Their views are reflected in those of the pilots. On 13 of the past 14 occasions when I travelled between Edinburgh and London, I asked the pilots for their views on the proposals. Every one is unanimously behind the British Air Line Pilots Association and Mr. Chris Darke. They are worried about who is in control when they have to land at the busy airports of Heathrow and Gatwick.

Mr. Donohoe: As usual, my hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge. The Select Committee took evidence from BALPA and we are therefore aware of pilots' anxieties. As a regular traveller on the route that my hon. Friend mentioned, I have been lobbied by pilots on the same subject. However, there will be plenty of opportunities for us to discuss NATS in future. It is only one aspect of air safety, and I want to mention some of the other subjects that the admirable Select Committee report considered.

First, I want to consider establishing an over-arching transport safety authority. Lessons should be learned from accidents that happen in all industries, not only the one that we are considering. We are perhaps better placed to deal with the problems of the virtual airlines, which have already been mentioned. However, it is more important for the industry to have well-qualified and highly motivated staff. I am especially worried about staff shortages in the safety regulation group. I am pleased to note that extra payments will be made to flight operations inspectors. I ask the Government to show similar flexibility in other cases.

The Select Committee was especially worried about the potential shortage of pilots and other staff. A review of air traffic operations took place in 1993. If PPP were introduced, staff shortages, coupled with the new owners' efficiency savings, would be extremely worrying. We must ensure that that does not lead to a drop in standards; standards are everything for the aviation industry.

Previous speeches have covered other subjects, but I want to concentrate on the fact that pilots must maintain United Kingdom standards, and be supported to do that. We welcome the Government's position. The Chicago convention and further testing of the Joint Aviation Authority require further attention in future.

There must be a greater focus on adequate training facilities in the industry. I do not believe that we should leave that to the private sector. The Select Committee concentrated on that. The Government must monitor the provision of facilities and ensure that the industry pays for the necessary facilities to maintain the high quality of services.

[Mr. Donohoe]

The lack of aircraft maintenance engineers is worrying. As an engineer, I know the importance of maintaining planes and all equipment. Evidence to the Select Committee suggested a reduction in the number of maintenance engineers. We welcome the fact that the Government will establish a working group. However, working groups do not reach conclusions as quickly as they might, and the problem requires immediate attention. The Government must ensure that the industry fulfils its responsibilities on aircraft maintenance engineers and training in general.

We must emphasise the quality of air traffic regulation in this country compared with that in Europe. Some anxieties have been expressed about air traffic regulations but, rather than leading to United Kingdom standards dropping to those of some other countries in Europe, the regulations should ensure that standards are maintained and even improved.

Parts of the Government's response to the report have been disappointing. They need to sharpen their responses to the particular anxieties that have been expressed today. I hope that, this afternoon, we will receive some of the answers that we did not get when we presented the report to Ministers.

2.48 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Transport safety is important to the public, especially after the Paddington rail crash. The debate is especially timely in view of the recent publication of the Transport Bill, which provides for the partial privatisation of National Air Traffic Services. The Select Committee has considered that proposal in a separate report. Nevertheless, it would be absurd not to consider public-private partnership in the debate, and many hon. Members have referred to it at length. I shall also comment on it.

The Liberal Democrats remain opposed to selling off NATS. The Select Committee's report and the Government's response contains nothing that convinces us that we should believe otherwise. The report's recommendations reinforce our opinion. Recommendation (h) rightly points to the dangers of continuing delay to the new air traffic control centre at Swanwick. The most important requirement is to ensure that the new centre at Swanwick is made operational without further delay. The Government acknowledged that in their response to the Select Committee, in which they claim that they are committed to opening the new en route centre at Swanwick as soon as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) made that point in a recent debate on transport safety.

In that debate, the Deputy Prime Minister rightly pointed out that there was already an overspend on the project and that Swanwick was more than three years late under the current system. That is entirely true, so it is all the more important to get on with making the centre operational, which is what NATS should be concentrating on.

Perhaps the Minister will tell me whether a major privatisation process and all the uncertainty that that entails will allow the management of NATS to concentrate, with no distractions, on getting Swanwick up and running at the earliest opportunity. It is worth pointing out that NATS, in a briefing today to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath, said that the whole debate, which has been going on since 1994, has been "very distracting and debilitating". Perhaps the Minister will say that it is having no impact on the delay to Swanwick, but that would contradict what NATS said in the briefing. He must confirm when Swanwick will be up and running. In the Government's response to the Select Committee report he said winter 2001–02 but, in response to my parliamentary question, he said spring 2002. The report and the answer were made at more or less the same time—there were perhaps a couple of weeks between them—so which is it?

The PPP for NATS is wrong at this time, although it is of course wrong in principle, and not only the Liberal Democrats are saying as much. There can be no doubt whatever that the overwhelming majority of staff are opposed to the proposal, as are the pilots, and 116 Labour Members signed an early-day motion in the previous Session confirming that they, too, were opposed or wanted other options to be considered.

What is not in doubt is the need for new infrastructure. As we know, demands on air services are growing and new technology is required. The issue is not whether new technology is needed, but how it should be funded. We have had ample opportunity in the past few weeks to debate the PPP for the tube. I do not intend to dwell on that, but it is clear from the Chancellor's recent pronouncements—one made as recently as yesterday—that his obsession with PPPs is driving this ill-conceived part-privatisation. He has ignored the alternative funding proposals made by us and many others.

Recommendation (g) of the report notes the nervousness of the general aviation or amateur flying community over the NATS sell-off. The Popular Flying Association is concerned that

"if NATS becomes a company that has shareholders and which will seek to maximise its profits and pay a return to its shareholders, it will be seeking to find income from any source it can."

The report further states:

"The implications for safety would be that either General Aviation pilots would be compressed into a smaller area or General Aviation activities would be compressed into a smaller area, or General Aviation pilots would continue to use the same altitudes as previously, straying into the same airspace as commercial aircraft."

There is concern from other sources.

Few people believe that privatisation, partial or otherwise, is a good idea. Happily, there are alternatives. The service does not need to be part-privatised. Another report by the Select Committee proposed alternatives, not least the successful Canadian model under which funding from private bonds has been found. We think that the Government should be considering that model. The safety of air travellers is paramount and for that reason I extend an offer of assistance to the Minister. If he chooses to abandon the PPP and opts instead for a public corporation model for NATS, he will receive the active support of Liberal Democrat Members in developing those proposals. We would help to facilitate the passage of any such plans through the House.

Mrs. Dunwoody: That is an offer we cannot refuse.

Mr. Brake: Exactly. I thank the hon. Lady for her sedentary intervention.

The Government's proposed PPP for NATS is the key concern in relation to aviation safety, but not the only one, and I shall raise a number of issues. I am particularly concerned about the implications of code sharing for safety standards and it raises issues similar to those that have already been mentioned in respect of virtual airlines. As the Minister will know, Delta Airlines had a code-sharing arrangement with Korean Airlines, which has been abrogated. I understand that the United States Department of Transportation is drafting safety guidelines that will apply to alliances between United States and foreign operators. Perhaps he will answer this question: when a UK airline enters a code-sharing arrangement with a foreign airline, what safety requirements are placed on the foreign operator and are the Government satisfied that the safety regulation group will be able to oversee such airlines to a sufficiently high standard?

Liberal Members believe that the Select Committee's recommendation that a safety regulation group should be incorporated into an independent transport safety authority requires detailed consideration. It could be a means of ensuring that best practice in one transport industry is adopted by another. I am conscious that the Minister will not want to pre-empt the Davis report findings, but can he give a commitment that the Government will tell the House how they intend to proceed as soon as they receive those findings? He might be in a position to make a statement on what progress may have been made by their review of transport safety matters.

As other hon. Members have said, if any issue warrants consideration at European level it is air safety. It is little comfort to British travellers that the British aviation industry has an excellent safety record. If they are landing in another country, our good standards may not ensure safe arrival at their destination. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will ensure that UK safety standards will not be compromised and that they will work positively with European partners to increase safety standards in Europe so that there is no dumbing down or lowest common denominator safety standard, a prospect referred to by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray)?

I represent a Greater London constituency so I have concerns about Heathrow airport. They have been referred to, particularly in relation to Malaysia Airlines aircraft landing when low on fuel. Our report recommends that the Government re-examine whether such aircraft should be allowed to approach Heathrow over central London. Their response was rather brief and seemed to suggest that they had not taken that recommendation on board. Can the Minister enlarge on their response and tell the House whether they have indeed re-examined the matter?

I am also a little perplexed by the Government's response to recommendation (l) of the report, which concerns foreign aircraft inspections. The report recommends a greater number of ramp checks—I note that they have taken that on board—and the introduction of random checks. The Committee stated that other European countries carry out such checks, but the Government responded by saying that the UK would contravene the Chicago convention obligations by introducing such a practice. On that specific and important point, perhaps the Minister will explain whether there is a contradiction and whether European countries are perhaps breaking their obligations.

Staff and training represent a further concern, and other hon. Members have referred to them. I want the Minister to respond to a specific question: will he today report to the House any interim findings of the interdepartmental working group, which was set up on 10 August, and can he give us a date for the delivery of the report?

The final concern to which I shall refer is the millennium, which is only a couple of weeks away. Will the Minister take perhaps the final opportunity to say whether the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions or Action 2000 will be issuing last-minute instructions to travellers that will perhaps list airlines about which there are no safety concerns whatever, as well as those about which there remain safety concerns over the millennium bug?

Safety worries relating to the aviation industry are very real, and are likely to increase. I have asked the Minister a number of specific questions; I hope that he will be able to respond to them today, or, failing that, that he will write to me in the near future. The key concern is still the part-privatisation of national air traffic services. I do not believe that there is any appetite for that in the House, in the aviation industry or in the country. The sooner the Government scrap it, the sooner the new Swanwick centre will be up and running, and the sooner we shall be able to build on our excellent safety record.

Finally, I must issue a challenge to the Minister. Can he put his hand on his heart and say that the Government are selling 51 per cent. of air traffic control because that will improve—not just maintain—safety standards?

Mr. Mullin: Yes.

Mr. Brake: The Minister says that he can do that. In his answer to a parliamentary question from me, he listed the arguments for public-private partnership, but the need to improve safety did not feature. He has another opportunity now.

The Minister knows—as, I think, do his Back Benchers—that this is really about money. It is about a smash-and-grab raid by the Treasury. Whether the Chancellor will have £350 million or £15 million in his war chest in return for the sale of NATS, I do not believe that the Minister—either in the Government's response, or here today—will be able to demonstrate that the sale is needed because it is the only way of improving safety in air traffic control. The Government must abandon their plans to privatise air traffic control: that is the one transport U-turn that everyone would welcome.

3.2 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): So far, all who have spoken have done two things. First, they have said how important and detailed the report is, and drawn attention to the time and trouble expended by the Committee and everyone else involved, including witnesses. Secondly, they have echoed a view expressed throughout the report, and stressed the high quality of the United Kingdom's aviation safety record. I do not think that that can be repeated too often.

As others have briefly pointed out, the background is an enormous growth in air traffic services. I am told that, in 1989, some 92 million passengers passed through British airports, and that 159 million did so in 1998. That represents an average annual growth of about 8 per cent.,

[Mr. George Stevenson]

and none of the evidence received by our Committee suggests that the same rate of growth is unlikely to continue. In many respects, there is a good tale to tell—a tale of which we should be proud. As the report and its recommendations suggest, the challenge is this: how can we at least maintain our record, and, if possible, improve it?

I share the disappointment expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) about the Government's response to a report that issues the challenge to which I have referred, and makes detailed, well-researched, specific recommendations on how it can be met. I want to highlight three points made in the report. The first relates to the safety regulation group, which is part of the Civil Aviation Authority. The report draws attention to a particular aspect of the group's vital activities. Our evidence suggested that, in recent years, it had taken a "hands-on" approach to aviation safety. That means that airlines and operators produce their safety plans and safety operations, and the safety regulation group considers them to establish whether they are adequate.

It could, I suppose, be argued that the process has worked. By definition, we would not have such a good safety record if it had not. So what is the problem? First, it clearly represents a move towards a self-regulatory regime, and that is not the purpose for which the safety regulation group was originally established. Secondly, we should consider the enormous growth in the industry that has already taken place, and the enormous growth that will take place in the future. We should also consider anxieties that have been expressed about virtual airlines. I think I am right in saying that the evidence that we received from the safety regulation group suggested that it was difficult to monitor the activities and safety standards of virtual airlines, because of their fragmented nature.

Given those and many other problems, we must consider seriously whether the hands-off embryonic self-regulatory approach that the safety regulation group seems to have developed over recent years is one on which we can depend for the future. I would feel rather more comfortable if we could be assured that the Government would engage in discussions with the CAA and the safety regulation group to ensure that the right balance was achieved. I would like to be sure that, as the process continues, we shall not lose sight of the concept that the safety regulation group should set standards and make inspections to ensure that they are applied, rather than simply judging whether the operators' plans are adequate. I think it essential for my hon. Friend the Minister to reconsider his response to the report's recommendation about the safety regulation group. I feel that it is complacent, and misses the important point that the report was trying to make.

I am also concerned about the relationship between the air accidents investigation branch, the CAA, the safety regulation group and the Government. By definition, the reports of the air accidents investigation branch follow accidents, some of which are tragic; they are therefore that much more important, in terms of the conclusions reached by the branch, and the action that it recommends the CAA and the Government to take to ensure that lessons are learned and such accidents do not occur again. The evidence we received suggested that recommendations made by the branch some years ago had still not been implemented.

We were worried about the cause of some tragic air accidents, including the infamous Boeing 737 accident, which resulted in many lost lives. Recommendations were made. I understand that there is still uncertainty about the cause and the recommendations; any recommendations that were made have not been implemented. There are other examples of that. Therefore, it is crucial that the issue of CAA involvement in air accidents investigation branch reports and recommendations, and the Government ensuring that the recommendations are acted on, is revisited urgently.

There is some merit in the CAA ensuring—as it does at the moment—that air accidents investigation branch recommendations and reports are made public, but the branch itself should perhaps publish its recommendations. In addition, as a matter of urgency, the Government should ensure that there is minimal delay in branch reports being made public and brought to the attention of Government, and that recommendations are implemented.

The final area to which I shall refer—in many ways, it is crucial to the debate about the future of air safety—is our relationship with European organisations, a matter that has been touched on by other hon. Members.

At the moment, we have the Joint Aviation Authority, which has been described as a club. Twenty-seven or 28 European nations get together, discuss issues and try to come to some conclusions. As the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) rightly said, it goes at the pace of the slowest camel in the train. We took evidence that clearly showed that three, four or five years may pass before conclusions are reached.

I know that the Government are worried about that. I suspect that it is one of the reasons why the Minister will say that the Government are in favour of developing the European profile, but we must make the decision making quicker and more efficient. We cannot tolerate inordinate delay in coming to decisions.

When we questioned the safety regulation group on the whole relationship between safety standards and regulations in the UK and what may happen in Europe, we were given assurances that, if there were inordinate delay and the JAA took decisions that reduced UK standards, the group would not hesitate to implement, or to improve, UK standards. That was reassuring, but the proposed European air safety authority is a different animal altogether. The JAA has no legal standing. EASA will be a legal entity. Presumably, therefore, its decisions will have the force of law.

If the safety regulation group is determined to ensure that safety standards in this country are not compromised as a result of the changed European profile, two things will be important. First, when and if EASA is set up as a legal entity and the safety regulation group does not agree fundamentally with a decision, the group will have two options. It can act illegally by doing something else and, as a result, begin to undermine EASA's credibility. We cannot have it both ways.

Mrs. Dunwoody: There is another alternative. The group can be ordered to maintain the compromise standard that is acceptable throughout Europe.

Mr. Stevenson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. It means that I do not have to detain the House with the second option. It is an important point.

The report makes it as clear as we could possibly make it that, if air safety standards in the UK are to be maintained and improved, we cannot tolerate international organisations, with perhaps the best will in the world, taking decisions that we are legally bound to apply, but that dilute those safety standards. We think—the report is clear about it—that the Government should be extremely careful and seek the most concrete assurances before they sign up to EASA.

I make two more quick points in relation to that. First, evidence to the Committee, which came from professionals in the industry, not from politicians, was clear. There is a north-south divide in Europe in relation to safety standards. Generally speaking, the north of Europe has much higher standards than southern Europe.

That leads to my second point. For my sins, I spent 10 years in the European Parliament, so I know a little about how the place works. We have heard the term "negotiation". People say, "Do not worry, we shall negotiate from a position of strength. We shall ensure that our interests are protected," and so on. That is fine. I differ from the hon. Member for North Wiltshire. There is a role to play in international co-ordination and co-operation on air transport. We have to be careful about falling into the trap of taking a little Englander view. By definition, that is the case. It is nonsense to argue differently.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is entirely misquoting me. I went to some lengths to say that co-operation was important. We must co-operate with our European partners, but federal integration of the type that is proposed under some of the new bodies is exactly what we do not want.

Mr. Stevenson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me that he used the word "federal." I do not think that that word is in the report, but it implies that there is some other political motive behind his point. Nevertheless, the point is well taken.

Much can be done through negotiation, but we must never forget that EASA will be subject to qualified majority vote. It will not be a matter of us saying that we will defend our standards when we are outvoted by other people who think that those standards are either not appropriate, or too burdensome. It is an important point.

The negotiation that will go on will be fine in many respects. I have no doubt about that, but we are concerned about the notion that the UK's high safety standards are negotiable. There is a strong argument that, in the public interest, and in the interests of the industry, those high safety standards are, by definition, non-negotiable. Therefore, there is an issue for the Government to consider. If we are entering negotiations, will it be right that our high standards should be subject to such negotiation, with all the potential pitfalls that could ensue?

This is a good and detailed report. It makes some important recommendations. I remain somewhat disappointed about the Government's response, which in some cases is complacent and verges on the sanguine. I hope that, as a result of the debate—I shall listen to the Minister with great interest—we have been able to persuade him and the Government that the report should be taken far more seriously than appears to be the case.

3.20 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson). A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting his part of the world for the first time, with a Joint Committee on a Special Procedure.

Partly because my husband works for an international airline, and is therefore a frequent traveller, I believe that aviation safety is an extremely important issue. I place great emphasis on his safety, as I do on that of others who work for his company and of everyone who travels by air.

I welcome the Select Committee report. I am also honoured to serve on the Transport Sub-Committee under the able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). I joined the Committee two weeks before publication of the report—it therefore constituted my first official involvement with the Committee—and there has been a learning curve.

I join the hon. Lady in regretting the rather disappointing, even poor, Government response to the report, and the four-month delay in drafting that response. I agree with the hon. Lady that we must avoid complacency in the aviation industry. The United Kingdom has one of the safest aviation industries in the world, and successive United Kingdom Governments have ensured that we have made some of the world's greatest investments in the industry, both in airport air traffic control and in airlines.

I pay tribute to those who work in the airlines, in the airports and in related industries—such as the Civil Aviation Authority and National Air Traffic Services—who have worked consistently towards achieving extremely high safety levels in the United Kingdom aviation industry. We have been able to achieve those high safety levels because of the contributions made by our pilots, engineers and air traffic controllers.

Like the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South, I was a Member of the European Parliament for 10 years. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that, on returning to the United Kingdom and taking my seat in this place, I would have the pleasure of serving with him. I do not think that, 15 years ago, either of us realised that we would again end up at the same place at the same time.

In playing its current role, the Joint Aviation Authority is handicapped by not having legal authority to impose agreed standards. I therefore view establishment of the European Aviation Safety Authority more positively than some other hon. Members may do.

The problem is one not only of setting European air safety standards, but of implementing agreed standards. As the Government's response notes, the Civil Aviation Authority has always played, and—rightly—will continue to play, a leading role in developing European standards in the Joint Aviation Authority.

Accident rates in Europe are among the world's lowest, and—as the Government's response states categorically—there is no evidence that harmonised safety standards have reduced United Kingdom safety levels.

I should like to make a confession: as a rapporteur of the Transport Committee of the European Parliament, I was involved in the creation of the European Aviation Safety Authority. The fact that any single organisation would lack teeth in implementing safety standards was the precise issue leading to the creation of the pan-European Aviation Safety Authority. Therefore, our objectives in

[Miss Anne McIntosh]

establishing the authority do not warrant the suspicions expressed today by some hon. Members. As the Government's response explained—I rarely agree with the Government's memorandums, and am therefore slightly alarmed to agree with their response to this report—the objective is to give EASA legal powers to impose the standards that it adopts.

The Civil Aviation Authority has assiduously imposed the standards set in the United Kingdom, and we must ensure that all our European partners aspire to equally high standards. Third-country carriers seeking to use European Union airports and air space also must match those high standards. Therefore, EASA can only add to the greater collective value of air safety across Europe.

Mr. Gray: Does my hon. Friend agree that the important thing is that all airlines and aircraft that use British air space and British airports should conform to the highest possible standards—which are those established by the Civil Aviation Authority, which is answerable to this place? The standards applying in Paris, Brussels or Hamburg are a matter for the national Governments of those places, not for this place.

Miss McIntosh: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend, but simply say—I realise that it is a radical view to take on either side of the House—that, although we pride ourselves on our high safety standards, we should not accept that passengers travelling on other European carriers, or on international carriers seeking to land in the United Kingdom or elsewhere in Europe, should have lesser safety standards.

An even more radical suggestion was made in the European Parliament: that, to ensure parliamentary accountability, a Member of the European Parliament should be on EASA's board, and that there should be annual reports from EASA to the European Parliament. The Minister, and perhaps other hon. Members, might like to comment on those suggestions.

Mrs. Dunwoody: As the hon. Lady is informed on the aviation industry, she will know that the type of airlines that we are talking about already comply with international standards, and that, almost without exception, those airlines support the International Civil Aviation Organisation, in which there are agreed common standards. Therefore, the issue is not one of not accepting international standards. Unfortunately, the history of our involvement in European institutions shows that, rather than harmonising upwards, we frequently harmonise downwards.

Miss McIntosh: My experience is perhaps more positive than the hon. Lady's. I shall return in a moment to the issue of third-country carriers. As she will remember, the Committee considered that issue—which I hope the Minister will address in his reply.

I welcome the Government's commitment to perform more ramp checks on foreign aircraft; their response commits them to performing 200 ramp checks annually. Although I appreciate that the Government are able to act only in response to specific concerns, I regret that random checks are deemed not to be compatible with our obligations under the Chicago convention. I believe that only with random checks and the element of surprise will we be able to impose the highest possible standard of inspections.

I invite the Minister to take this opportunity to update the House on the point just made by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, on arrangements to travel into the United Kingdom from certain third countries at the millennium—which is only two weeks away. We should certainly like to send a positive message of safety to all those who use that type of transportation service over the holidays, and this debate might provide the Minister with an opportune moment to update us on the issue. I believe that officials in his Department said that the permits of four countries might be lifted at the millennium, which is fast approaching.

I share the concern expressed by the Select Committee, in its report, and by people outside the House, of a potential pilot shortage. United Kingdom safety standards cannot be compromised, and we should have sufficient pride in our civil aviation industry to attract a steady stream of recruits.

I have similar concerns about the recruitment and training of engineers and air traffic controllers. I hope that the Minister will deal in his reply with those concerns, as expressed in the Select Committee report.

During my time in the European Parliament, as Member of the European Parliament for Essex North and Suffolk South, I had the privilege of representing Stanstead airport. I therefore appreciate that, in many areas surrounding airports—such as, particularly, north Essex and south Suffolk, where air traffic and approach congestion are increasing—local people are increasingly concerned about stacking over airports at peak times. I should like the Government to address that, because it is difficult for busy airports to balance their development with the concerns of those who live nearby.

The cost of smoke hoods and the training of passengers in their use are also important issues. Many passengers do not fly regularly or do not use the same type of aircraft every time. The Government response covered the point adequately. It said:

> "Earlier research indicated that the delays in evacuation caused by untrained passengers trying to don smokehoods would cause a greater loss of life from fire than the number saved by reduced inhalation of toxic fumes."

I do not want to be alarmist, but we have to balance safety against the fact that many domestic and European internal flights last less than 40 or 50 minutes. In many cases, there is not enough time to train passengers—including me; I am not always an ideal passenger—to use the complicated smoke hoods. The cost of fitting smoke hoods for every passenger could put low-cost carriers such as Ryanair and easyJet and possibly also Go and Buzz out of operation.

We would all like air rage to be addressed, particularly by discouraging potentially disruptive passengers. There is the growing problem of passengers who refuse to switch off their mobile phones and laptop computers. It is incumbent on the Government to impress on such passengers that those are serious offences that could be life threatening to a plane load of passengers. Those offences must be tackled seriously and stiff penalties must be imposed.

My final point is about military aircraft using uncontrolled airspace. That is of particular concern to me, because my constituency covers RAF Leeming,

RAF Linton and Dishforth. I note that the Government intend to install a collision warning system for the ground attack Tornado GR4 aircraft. I should like a commitment from the Minister that the same system will be extended to the Eurofighter when it comes into operation in 2002, which will use bases such as RAF Leeming.

3.33 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I join the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) in congratulating our air traffic controllers. We are grateful for the astonishing job that they do. This country has an enviable air safety record at the moment. However, I should like to address the factors behind my constituents' genuine concerns about air safety. We are constantly reminded of the issue in Richmond Park.

After the Southall rail crash, when safety was questioned, Mr. Justice Scott Baker said:

"There may be a conflict between profit and safety."

Many comments and comparisons have been made since then about the effects of privatisation on safety factors. Despite assurances about responsibility for safety being separated from the privatised NATS, people are very worried. That is a prime concern for my constituency, which lies under the two approach flight paths to Heathrow. We cannot forget about air safety. When aircraft pass over the area every one or two minutes during the day—despite runway alternation, thousands of people are affected every day and every night—conversations stop, teachers stop teaching and at night sleepers awake. There is a constant reminder of what might happen.

We have heard about aircraft flying with near-empty tanks. I got an unsatisfactory response when I questioned the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about that after one incident. I was told that it was not this country's responsibility. That is extraordinary, when the aircraft are flying over our people.

We also hear about near misses in the sky. We are reassured that there are many more aeroplanes in the sky now but that the number of near misses has not risen in proportion, but they are certainly well publicised. People are very conscious of them and the number is rising each year, even if the proportion is not. The Minister shakes his head, but paragraph 21 of the Select Committee's report shows how numbers have risen.

Over the past 12 months, we have had some frightening attacks from the air in my constituency. In December last year, the body of a boy fell into a—thankfully derelict—site in Mortlake from an Air India flight. The boy had stowed away in the wheel housing and fell on a gas works next to a school. The Civil Aviation Authority carried out a full investigation after the inquest, but the only result was that the airline was asked to make tighter checks before its planes took off. That is not much comfort to my constituents when they remember that bodies have fallen out of the air.

On 12 November this year, a block of brownish ice fell through the roof of the school that was missed by the body 12 months ago. I shall not use unparliamentary language to describe what that brown ice really was, but the airline described it as

"frozen effluent created by seepage through the aircraft structures."

Whatever it was, it was very nasty. Luckily, it came through the roof of the school and not into the playground where the children were playing. The CAA promised another full investigation, but we have not heard any more about it. I was told on the telephone only two days ago that one of my constituents, Mr. Malcolm Welchman, was narrowly missed when walking along the pavement by another block of brown ice falling out of the sky. The incident has been reported to the CAA, which is trying to track the aircraft from which it came.

The situation is worrying. The Minister might investigate and name the airlines involved in such outrages. Why are such aircraft that come in to land at our airports not severely fined? Money from those fines should go on environmental projects or further safety measures. Eventually, somebody will be seriously injured.

The number of aircraft coming in over my constituency is another subject of concern. In 1993, the British Airports Authority forecast that, if terminal 5 went ahead, Heathrow would be able to take 420,000 air traffic movements every year. By 1996, there were 423,000 air traffic movements.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Does the hon. Lady accept that the number of aircraft movements is not limited solely by terminal capacity, but—much more importantly—by runway capacity? It is an extraordinary achievement of British airports to have produced so many more movements with the same amount of runway. Terminal buildings are not the problem.

Dr. Tonge: That point is made to me often. The danger is that, because we were promised no further development at Heathrow after terminal 4 and we now face the prospect of terminal 5, we know also that it will not be long before there could be a third runway. That is one of the problems for my constituents—promises and forecasts never come true, and are always overturned by events.

By 1997, the number of air traffic movements had increased. In 1998-99, we are already seeing in the region of 425,000 to 430,000 air traffic movements a year. Even without the new terminal or further development at Heathrow, estimates are already way above predictions. It is no wonder my constituents do not believe a word that BAA says. It is all lies to them.

My constituents do not believe very much of what is told them by the Government either when it comes to air safety and what will happen in and around Heathrow. We know that BAA will go on increasing air traffic movements with or without terminal 5. Will air traffic control cope in the future? Has that been considered? Will a privatised industry cope? Will it all have to cope on a shoestring until we start having collisions and crashes and the ensuing inquiries come up with the same remarks as were made after the Southall train disaster?

I cannot resist one last point. Can the Minister tell me when the inspector's report after the inquiry into terminal 5 will be published? Will the Government accept all the report's recommendations when it is published?

3.42 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): It is with some trepidation that I rise to speak, as I am not a member of the august Select Committee. However, the nub of the issue is something on which I have a little expertise. During this year, I have been privileged to be a member of the parliamentary armed forces scheme. As a result,

[Mr. Tony McWalter]

I have witnessed at first hand many of the air traffic control systems around various forces and places in this country. In addition, I was, for a time, a director of computing in a university, and I wish to talk explicitly about the information technology side of the debate.

By instinct, I am strongly in favour of keeping the air traffic control system within the public sector. One feels strongly about it because its record and professionalism have been so good. People have referred a great deal to the achievements of air traffic controllers. Having witnessed them at first hand, I have to say that I am somewhat worried about the quality of the instruments that they need to use to carry out their job.

It is true that air traffic controllers have fantastic expertise and ability to cope, but increasing air traffic year on year means that their task gets more and more difficult, and the ancient instruments that they use to monitor air traffic movements become more and more strained.

The Government are right to be concerned about trying to find a way forward that will meet that severe challenge. Even if we have a system that has been incredibly safe for 20 years, if we keep increasing the capacity, there comes a point at which it will no longer be safe.

With a database that has an order of complexity of 100, some people think that one can perform much the same operations to cover a database with an order of complexity of 120 or 200. However, there comes a point at which the extra demands being made require one completely to redesign that database, and to think again about how one copes with the extra pressures being put on it. That is true even in elementary arithmetic. Perhaps most of us can multiply two double-digit numbers, but most will find it difficult to multiply two quadruple-digit numbers. That small increased complexity taxes us to our limits.

In computing terms, that is what is happening with air traffic control. We are faced with the need for a radically new system. The Liberal Democrats say that there is a strong need for new infrastructure. I am not worried about that so much as the expertise available to us in IT to cope with the transition. Change we must, and all those locked into the current system—be they air traffic controllers or pilots—are worried about the change. They know how complicated it has become; they know how big Topsy has grown.

Yet we must find a way of managing that change while keeping the outstanding safety with which we have managed change over the past couple of decades. Doing that will require new resources. I am old-fashioned enough to think that, if that were the only issue, air traffic control should remain in the public sector and we should find those resources. However, I am much more worried about the problem of expertise.

North of the border, people talked this week about the number of civil servants with extreme expertise in fisheries, but little expertise in IT. That is also true south of the border, and in the British Isles in general. The public sector in general lacks the IT expertise that is needed to make the transition. That is due partly to history, partly to the way in which we recruit civil servants, and partly to pay rates. In my constituency—a high-tech constituency—people get £50,000, £60,000 or £100,000 a year for doing such jobs. It would be difficult to earn that much in any job in the public sector. Such people accordingly migrate towards the Microsofts and IBMs of the private sector.

As the expertise is increasingly in the private sector, it is right that, whatever else happens in the transition, the Government should lock themselves on to that expertise and try to find a way of marrying the professionalism, commitment and dedication of people such as our air traffic controllers to the extraordinary expertise that will be needed in IT to manage the revolution effectively.

That is why, despite the fact that a number of my esteemed colleagues signed an early-day motion in the previous Session lamenting the Government's stance on the matter, I found myself unable to sign it. I think that something like a public-private partnership, using the ideas about which I have talked, is needed. That does not mean privatisation, losing control or marginalising the commitment to public service that has rightly characterised the service for so long. The expertise will help us to achieve the results that we seek. We should also give recognition to the employees. The resulting structure would allow us to manage the difficult and dangerous transition in the most effective way possible.

Mrs. Dunwoody: The hazard of that argument is that the whole Swanwick exercise has been undertaken by private sector companies from the beginning. If there was a problem, it was not with the expertise in the civil service but with the project management and the computer companies. The civil service already has an extremely useful unit in Norwich, with enormous computer expertise, that is not used by Departments.

Mr. McWalter: That argument is not compelling because the expertise held in the private sector does not always make it through into public contracts. Under the previous Government, a computer company—I will not name it, although I know that I can do so here—sold inferior products to the public sector and did not provide adequate support. In my view, that was because there was insufficient expertise in the civil service to secure the right contracts to hold the private companies accountable.

There are clearly different ways of slicing the top off that egg, but, in my view, the failures show the lack of expertise in the public sector. I am saying not that the whole public sector has a lamentable lack of expertise in information technology—that would not be true—but that the kind of expertise needed to make the transition effective needs to be tapped into in an appropriate way. I hope that, between us, we can sort out the arguments to the benefit of air safety, air passengers and our transport system.

3.52 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Like the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), I am not a member of the Select Committee, but I am delighted to be able to contribute to our debate and to have heard the very interesting contributions that have been made. I apologise to the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), for not having been here for her speech; I was engaged at another institution on the Strand. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) said: she has brought great distinction to her chairmanship.

I declare more than a passing interest, as I have been an aviator for the best part of 33 years—I held a pilot's licence before I held a licence to drive a motor car—and I have the privilege of representing Farnborough, which is the birthplace of British aviation. In Farnborough, we have the aerodrome—the site of the first manned flight in the United Kingdom, when Samuel Cody took off on 16 October 1908—the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency headquarters, British Aerospace headquarters and the air accidents investigation branch.

I want to single out the air accidents investigation branch and its head, Ken Smart, for the phenomenal work that is done there. I am sure that members of the Committee will be aware of it, but I am not sure how many members of the public appreciate the fantastic resource of skill and forensic science that we have in the AAIB. I have seen the remains of the Lockerbie PanAm 747 there. Mr. Smart showed me how the branch had determined how that aeroplane met its fate. The fact that it could do that is a tribute to the way in which it works.

There are two branches: the engineers, who are all pilots, and the pilots, who are all engineers. They cross-fertilise in a very impressive operation. To a pilot, the institution is a little grim, because it is something of a morgue, with the remains of crashed aeroplanes; but I pay tribute to it none the less.

I echo what the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) said about the high aviation safety standards that we enjoy. There has been universal recognition in this debate that the United Kingdom is extremely well served in that respect. We are an air-minded country and a world leader in many aspects of aviation, and it should come as no surprise to the House or the wider public that we have cause to be proud of our air safety record.

The air traffic controllers, especially in the London airports region, have performed their task with immense skill, despite the huge increase in traffic. I sought to make that point to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge). The House debated 10 years ago whether Heathrow should have its number of traffic movements raised to 275,000 and whether it was possible to move any more traffic there. We were told that it was not. In fact—her constituents are right to be concerned about it—there has been a 30 to 40 per cent. increase, which is again a tribute to the skills of the air traffic controllers.

The hon. Lady talked about the number of reported airproxes—they used to be called near misses, but we now have an airprox board. In 1998, the number of risk-bearing airprox incidents involving public transport flights per 100,000 flying hours was 1.2, compared with 2.37 in 1997 and 2.87 in 1996. That suggests that there has been an actual reduction, not simply a proportional reduction.

Dr. Tonge: The hon. Gentleman is comparing one year with a trend that was otherwise going up.

Mr. Howarth: I freely confess that I was using only the figures for the past three years, and I do not suggest that we should be complacent. There is certainly no room for complacency. We continue to enjoy high standards of air safety only because there is no complacency. Heaven forbid that there should be any in the House. It is vital that anyone with any interest in aviation should recognise that the number 1, 2 and 3 priorities are safety, safety and safety.

We should none the less take encouragement from the picture that the figures give us of the state of play at the moment. In fairness, we should not stir up unnecessary concerns among the public, especially those who live near airports. The figures show that the situation is not getting worse.

Dr. Tonge: We need some clarification. The proportion of near misses to flights has been going down, which is excellent, but there has still been an overall increase in the number of near misses per year. That is what worries my constituents.

Mr. Howarth: I was seeking to show that there cannot have been an actual increase in the number. A reduction to 1.2 from 2.37 per 100,000 flying hours in 1997 suggests that the number has halved, and I am not sure that the number of flying hours will have gone up; but let us leave that point now.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead made an interesting point. I had the opportunity last year of flying on the Civil Aviation Authority's BAC 1-11 development aeroplane. Incidentally, I take the opportunity of this debate to say to Sir Malcolm Field that I hope that he retains that aeroplane in the CAA's control, because it does valuable work. I saw an exciting new development in operation on the aeroplane that would enable the pilot to use a rollerball—of the type with which we are all familiar from computers—to change the track on his navigational display, either because of bad weather or for another reason, and to press a button to transmit the new track to the air traffic controllers. Using the software, they could then establish whether the track were safe or conflicted with other traffic. If the track were safe, they could immediately authorise the pilot to adopt the new track. He would then press a button and the new track would be fed into the autopilot and the aeroplane would fly safely. The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead may be reassured on that point.

I represent Farnborough as part of my constituency, and concerns have rightly been expressed to me about the proposals for new developments there, following the sale of the airfield by the Ministry of Defence to a company called TAG. Several years ago, the previous Government suggested that Farnborough should be the main business and general aviation airfield for London and the south-east of England, a decision that this Government also supported. I, too, endorse that decision, although my constituents are concerned about the number of movements, and safety is an important factor to them. I hope that the Minister will be able to assist Rushmore borough council in coming to an agreement on the planning application by TAG that will enable the airfield to continue to operate and, therefore, to continue to be the home of the world-famous Farnborough international air show.

The Committee made some important points about general aviation. I shall not rehearse the debate that we had recently on the air navigation order, in which the Minister mounted a stout defence against my concerns about general aviation. Paragraph 54 of the Committee's report states:

"We recommend that the Government should take steps to ensure that access to training and practice for General Aviation pilots is not unduly limited, either by cost or by planning constraints. We believe

[Mr. Howarth]

that all pilots should be given incentives to undergo training and, accordingly, recommend that VAT should not be charged for appropriate training courses."

I strongly endorse that recommendation and urge the Minister to adopt it. There is no doubt, as the Popular Flying Association has made clear, that the more pilots fly, the safer they are likely to be. The higher the cost of private flying is driven, the less likely people will be to keep their licences current—hence the more dangerous they become when they fly. Perhaps the Minister could also persuade the Chancellor to remove the tax on Avgas fuel, which is one of the high-cost elements of private flying.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead made a good point about the privatisation of NATS, and I agree with him. I have constituents who are air traffic controllers and I know that they have concerns. Safety is of course of paramount importance, but the experience of privatisation of BA and the BAA has not resulted in any diminution in safety. The PPP proposed for NATS is also unlikely to reduce air safety. I have spoken to Bill Semple and visited Swanwick and the London air traffic control centre at West Drayton, and I cannot believe that the professional people I met would do anything other than put safety at the top of their priorities.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who speaks for the Opposition on transport, made an important speech recently on the issue of Eurocontrol. I am concerned that the European Union is seeking a seat on the Eurocontrol board, because it is made up of sovereign nations and I suspect that the EU will simply supplant the individual nation states.

I am also concerned about the possible consequences for slot allocation in this country and for our negotiations with the United States of America about transatlantic access to gateway points. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South was right to point out the dangers of qualified majority voting if it were to be applied to the proposed new European aviation safety authority. Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), have expressed concerns about that proposal; I echo them and hope that the Minister will take them into account.

4.6 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I shall be succinct, because we want to hear from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. As a non-member of the Committee, I wish to thank all my parliamentary colleagues who spend a lot of time on Select Committees and do valuable work on our behalf. I thank the Chairman and the members of the Committee.

I wish to restate the direct question put by the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), because it bears repetition. How will integration with military flights be achieved under the Government's proposals? There may be a very good answer, but the fact remains that, not so many days ago, a very ugly incident occurred over Edinburgh airport, when a low-flying military aircraft on its approach suddenly had to gain flight because a bird apparently got into one of its engines. That created a situation that posed definite danger to a British Midland passenger aircraft. I contacted the Ministry of Defence to ask it for the details, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will do the same and answer, by letter or in his speech in reply to the debate if possible, the question about integration with military flying.

We all reflect our pasts, and part of my past was being seconded to P&O and the British India Steam Navigation Company. It was an absolute rule for anybody working on a ship that one obeyed the captain. Therefore, I believe that the pilots have a special position on all the proposals. Many Scottish Members fly every week to be here and some of us have taken the trouble to talk to the pilots in whose hands we and our fellow passengers place ourselves. On 13 occasions out of 14 recently—the other time the pilot was understandably busy with training—I have asked the pilots what they think of the proposals. I have asked whether they support Chris Darke and the British Air Line Pilots Association, or whether it is an instance of a professional association arguing a case. I can faithfully report to the House that every one of those pilots, with varying degrees of vehemence, said that they did not like the proposals as they understood them.

It may be that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has a good case, and I am not ill-disposed towards him because he, the Chairman of the Committee and I were all part of the bureau of the Socialist group of the European Parliament some 21 years ago. I therefore have great good will towards my right hon. Friend, but we are entitled to ask before we pledge support for the proposals how it is that the Government have been unable to persuade the pilots. The pilots make the precise point that it is all right to fly into busy airports such as Edinburgh and Glasgow, but that it is an entirely different matter to fly into the world's fourth busiest airport, Gatwick, or the world's busiest airport, Heathrow. They say that they want to be sure that there is unified control. If the Government fail to persuade the pilots on this matter, I fear that they will have to do without my vote.

4.10 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): We have had a good debate and the Select Committee should be congratulated on the work that it has done on the report, which covers a subject that is of growing importance to all our constituents. I particularly thank my hon. Friends for their contributions to the debate; my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) made some very goods points as did my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), with whom I slightly disagree over some issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) is a pilot and represents a constituency with strong aviation interests and he always makes good points in the Chamber.

Many Labour Back Benchers also made sensible and measured proposals. When the House debates a Select Committee or a factual report on a matter that is of such concern to our constituents, it is sometimes at its best. I hope that the Minister will reply to many of the good and telling questions that Labour Members asked.

As was said earlier, the number of passengers passing through British airspace has increased from 93.2 million in 1988 to 159 million in 1998. In the same period, the number of commercial flights has increased from 1,135,264 in 1988 to 1,762,870 in 1998. That is an increase of 55.3 per cent. It is forecast that air traffic will increase by 50 per cent. over the next 15 years. The arrival of low-cost aviation has made air travel a possibility for all.

Heathrow has 98 movements per hour—that is a take-off or landing every 36.7 seconds. It is a tribute to the CAA that the tremendous increase in travel has been accompanied by improvements in safety standards. Flying in a commercial aircraft, particularly one registered in the United Kingdom, is a safe way to travel. However, the Select Committee has raised several concerns that we need to address today.

What first concerned me was that the Committee felt that much of the oral evidence that it had received was complacent and tended to emphasise the current good safety record rather than examining the challenges ahead. It is vital that the safety culture in the aviation industry is paramount and that the Government ensure that any proposals to change the existing system are based on research.

The safety regulation group of the CAA faces challenges both from deregulation and the arrival of low-cost airlines. I was particularly interested in the Committee's description of a virtual airline, a subject that several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson), mentioned. That is a fragmented airline, which perhaps leases aircraft and engines from outside the UK. In the past, the safety regulation group has been forced, simply through pressure of work, to pursue a less proactive role, leaving more of the checks to individual airlines. With well-known carriers, that may not be a problem but, with the arrival of new airlines, we need to ensure that they are properly supervised.

The Committee has identified a number of problems that I shall touch on, although with such a comprehensive report, it would be unfair to Members wishing to speak if I dwelt on all of them for too long. Airprox incidents—the number of risk-bearing near misses involving public transport flights—have decreased. In 1998, there were 1.2 for every 100,000 flying hours compared with 2.07 in 1997 and 2.87 in 1996.

Instances of overload have more than doubled. The number of periods when traffic controllers felt that volume was too great to guarantee safety was 49 in 1998–99 compared with 24 in the previous 12 months and 16 in 1996–97. National Air Traffic Services is finding handling the massive increases in air traffic increasingly difficult, with ageing equipment, under-investment and pressure from airlines to reduce delays. A senior official of NATS said earlier this year:

"We can cope with 3 per cent. annual growth but 7 per cent. and higher is really stretching things".

The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety has highlighted to me the conflict between safety and capacity. There are concerns about the recent reduction in the vortex rate at Heathrow from 3 to 2.5 miles and whether that rate may be eroded further. The issue was raised with the Select Committee by the Guild of Air Traffic Control Officers.

Another key concern are developments in Europe. We are members of the JAA, which was established in 1970. It includes regulating authorities from 27 European states, including the CAA. The JAA operates as a club and its decisions are not legally binding on its members. It is fair to say that there was criticism from witnesses to the Committee about those arrangements, which clearly need improving. However, the Committee was also clearly unenthusiastic about the Government's preferred solution of developing EASA to replace it.

Conservative Members believe in the nation state and in co-operation on an international intergovernmental level. We therefore oppose EASA being turned from an international organisation into one controlled by the European Union. We also resist the proposals now emanating from Mr. Prodi and the Commission with its "15 states, one sky" policy to take over the Eurocontrol organisation. That proposal was discussed last week by Transport Ministers in Brussels. Unfortunately, the Government, with their usual craven attitude, are falling over themselves to sign up to obligations that will result in EU involvement in the control of our airspace.

Conservatives fully support co-operation with other countries for better management of air traffic control. For many years, Britain has been a leading member of Eurocontrol—the European body that covers air traffic control in not just EU states but national regional air traffic control systems across the continent. There are huge air traffic problems in continental Europe. Other countries do not manage their systems well and cause European travellers horrendous delays. Those problems can be solved by continued co-operation rather than integration. They are not a pretext for the EU to muscle in and grab a whole new area of legal control. That is why we would have vetoed those latest moves.

Labour supports the proposal that the EU should itself become a member of Eurocontrol. That means that the EU will not only take over member states' negotiations in Eurocontrol, but will automatically acquire the power to make law and regulations about the airspace of the member states. The EU is due to join Eurocontrol on 27 January next year and that is a massive increase in EU legal competence.

The Government need to answer some crucial questions. What are the overwhelming reasons for Britain to give up control of our skies? What can the EU achieve for air traffic management in Europe in Eurocontrol which will not be achieved for Eurocontrol's non-EU members? If other EU members states are determined to go ahead, why should the UK not have an opt-out?

We have the best air traffic control in Europe, if not the world. It is hard to see what Britain will gain from this arrangement. We must not fall for the line that European integration will mean that the other EU countries will change their ways and adopt ours. The common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy have surely taught us that. Several hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and for Stoke-on-Trent, South have made that point. We need services to be improved not a levelling down.

Most important are the defence and security consequences. The EU is not a member of NATO, and many EU countries are non-NATO members. What are the defence and security implications of a non-NATO body partly controlled by non-NATO countries acquiring the supreme authority over UK airspace?

We are in favour of co-operation. We are full and active members of Eurocontrol as an international organisation; however, we are against unnecessary expansion of EU power for its own sake. It is plain that this proposal is really about European federalism and that Labour is selling out our vital national interests.

NATS has been the focus of the debate. Many hon. Members have expressed their concern about the Government's public-private partnership proposals. I do

[Mr. Robert Syms]

not believe that safety issues will be affected by the change in status of NATS, but Government hesitation in the past two years or so may have damaged short-term investment. The Government's PPP is a convoluted compromise that has delayed the sale of NATS for the past couple of years. To quote my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), the shadow Transport Minister:

"While the Government were searching for a way to spin this privatisation in the media and the Department was missing slots in the legislative timetable, Britain's air traffic system has been starved of capital investment and has had investment plans shelved".

Conservative Members want a simple flotation with a golden share to provide for permanent UK control.

Another interesting point, raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire, concerned how little money would be raised by the sale of NATS. The explanatory note to the Transport Bill states:

"Income from the partial sale of NATS to a strategic partner could raise in the region of £350 million. Against that, NATS has outstanding loans of around £300 million which will need to be settled . . . the total cost of establishing a public-private partnership . . . will be approximately £35 million".

That means that only £15 million will be raised from the sale. I was interested in the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire, and in the Minister's intervention. I hope that the Minister will enlighten the House about how the Government will get more than the figure that they put in that explanatory note.

If the Government are serious about a PPP, they need investment from the private sector. The Opposition caution the Minister against accepting bids from foreign companies that are wholly or partially state owned. For instance, Thompson CSF of France is 40 per cent. owned by the state.

There is a real problem with NATS. All other air traffic control systems in the world are owned by the public sector. Many of the potential bidders for NATS, therefore, could be other states' air traffic control organisations. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to rule out the possibility that the air traffic systems of neighbouring states such as southern Ireland might be allowed to bid for a share of NATS.

Whenever there is a debate about air safety or NATS, the subject of Swanwick comes up, and several hon. Members mentioned it today. I hope that the Minister will reassure the House that the opening date for Swanwick remains spring 2002, as he said in a recent written answer.

Several hon. Members also mentioned the delay in setting up the oceanic flight data processing centre at Prestwick. Will the Minister tell us when the contract will be signed, if it has not been signed already? What is the target date for the centre's opening?

A recurring theme in the Select Committee report was the problem of staff shortages. Staffing and training were among the key issues in the Committee's proposals. The safety regulation group has problems filling vacancies—five of its 45 posts remain vacant—and, as is the case with almost all such organisations, it faces stiff competition from the private sector over the recruitment of suitable staff. There is an argument that the staff of many of the bodies mentioned in the debate should enjoy better pay and conditions. That would ensure that we can maintain and keep the first-rate people needed to give confidence in air safety.

Mention was made earlier of the air accidents investigation branch of the Department of Trade and Industry, which has also suffered from staff shortages. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich said that she hoped that the Minister would state that those shortages have been made good. However, a real problem of staff retention exists in those services.

The report states that, until 15 years ago, 70 per cent. of those working as pilots or in engineering posts were ex-military. Clearly, given the way in which the world is going, the problem of filling those posts will get worse unless the Government—and the private sector—offer a lot more in terms of training to ensure that we get people of the right calibre.

I was also interested in the Committee's plea that English be pushed as the language of the air, and made the standard for air-ground communication. In some respects, I understand other countries' opposition to that proposal, but it is an important point and I hope that the Government acknowledge it.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire raised the problem of runway capacity in the south-east. The Government's response seemed to suggest that they did not consider that there was any particular problem. However, in the document entitled "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" published in July 1998, the Government said that a White Paper would be produced setting out airport policy for the next 30 years. I know that a possible factor in the delay to that White Paper has been the Heathrow terminal 5 inquiry. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) noted, it would be helpful if the Minister could give the House some idea of when we will hear the terminal 5 inquiry date, and of when we can expect a White Paper setting out a sensible airport policy for the future.

The Government have taken on board some of the Select Committee's recommendations, but I was worried to hear the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich say that the tone and quality of the Government's response had been poor, and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South described his disappointment at the way in which some of the recommendations had been received. Those two hon. Members are senior and respected figures, so it is fair to say that there has not been great joy and happiness at the Government's response. However, I know that, if the Government do not respond satisfactorily in the short term, hon. Members will come back to the House to ensure that they take the Select Committee report more seriously.

We welcome the aviation safety report by the Select Committee. However, we remain concerned about greater EU involvement in our skies and about some of the Government's rather convoluted plans for a PPP for NATS. However, this has been a good debate, on a topic that is close to the hearts of the many of our constituents who travel far and wide. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): As the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) said, this has been a good debate. If I may say so, we have been discussing a good report. Although I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) will not be deflected by flattery, I pay tribute to her long interest in these matters. As I shall probably have to repeat several times in my speech, I can assure her that we take the report's recommendations very seriously.

It will not be possible for me to deal with all the issues raised this afternoon. There are rather a lot of them: some had only a tangential relevance to the subject but, happily, most were relevant. I shall do my best, but I shall be glad to write to hon. Members if I miss out any of the main points.

The allegation running through the debate has been that the Government are in some way complacent about air safety. I entirely refute that. We are not content with the status quo. We do not believe that everything is perfect. I shall not even go so far as to say that our air safety arrangements are the best in the world. I shall say only that they are among the best in the world, as the House will accept.

During my years in the House, I have heard many of our institutions—police, judges, soldiers and so on—described as the best in the world, most often by Conservative Members. That radiates an air of complacency that I have no wish to adopt, so I shall confine myself to saying that our air safety record is among the best in the world. Work goes on continuously to make sure that we maintain that record.

One requirement to being taken seriously in this matter is to ensure that we do not react in a knee-jerk fashion to tragedies. When a tragedy happens, everyone make an instant analysis of the circumstances, and experiences a personal gut feeling about what was wrong or about what should have happened. However, the benefit of hindsight is that it often shows that initial reactions were incorrect. It is vital, therefore, when dealing with important issues of safety, to reflect maturely and undertake proper research and analysis before reaching conclusions.

Some recommendations might even have an adverse affect on safety. For example, the use of smoke hoods was proposed soon after the Manchester accident, and subsequently. However, it has been suggested that smoke hoods could impede evacuation: if so, they would not necessarily be desirable.

Many hon. Members have spoken about air traffic control and about the Government's plans in that respect. Other opportunities will arise to debate those matters—the next coming on Monday, so I shall make only a few general points on the matter.

Many hon. Members have asked when we expect Swanwick to open. I can confirm that it is on target, which is more than can be said about the arrangements that we inherited. It is expected to open in spring 2002. What is most important is not to predict in advance the day or week when it will open, but to get it right. Stringent tests and training will take place between now and then to make sure that we get it right. Thus far, I am glad to say, opening is on target.

We inherited a considerable mess at Prestwick and we are doing our best to put it right. That has involved unravelling some arrangements. If ever there was a case for getting some private sector skills into project management, it is the project management at Prestwick. It is anticipated that Prestwick should be ready by the winter of 2005-06, but I hope that no one will attempt to hold me to a particular day or week. Once again it is important to get it right.

I repeat a point that Ministers and everyone concerned with safety regulations has made at every opportunity—that aviation safety is, and will continue to be, paramount. That theme runs through all our plans for the future of air traffic control. We intend to separate, and keep separate, safety regulation from operations.

I think that it was my hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, South (Mr. Donohoe)—forgive me if I am wrong—who made a comparison with Railtrack. There is none to be made. One of the big mistakes about Railtrack is that it was left with some safety responsibilities. It is a cardinal rule of effective safety procedure that safety regulation is kept separate from operations. That happens now and will be written into our arrangements for a public-private partnership of air traffic control. Far from undermining safety, we shall enhance safety arrangements. We are in the process of talking to all interested parties, including air traffic control and pilot representatives. We are taking seriously all their suggestions—they have made several constructive suggestions—for improving safety arrangements. For example, we hope to include on the board a director who has specific responsibility for safety. That will be an improvement.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for giving way and perhaps he was going to come to this point. Can he explain why he did not include improved safety in his written answer which listed arguments for PPP? Was that simply an oversight or what?

Mr. Mullin: With the greatest respect, that is a silly point.

Mr. Brake: It is a serious point.

Mr. Mullin: Our position, which I stated at the outset and which I now repeat, is that safety is paramount. The safety arrangements that exist now are extremely good, as everyone recognises. We intend to maintain them when the PPP is up and running. In addition, we are willing to listen to any sensible suggestions, from whatever source, to enhance safety. We have had some sensible suggestions and we are taking them seriously. Indeed, I expect to implement some of them. I make the point again that the PPP of air traffic control will, if anything, enhance safety arrangements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, South mentioned that there was a public perception that the sale of part of air traffic control would undermine safety. Like many public perceptions, it is wrong. It is the job of all responsible people to put right such misconceptions. Indeed, those misconceptions are shared by a number of hon. Members, and it is the job of the Government and those concerned with safety regulation and of the management of air traffic control to make sure that the correct perception and correct facts are given to the public.

[Mr. Mullin]

It is a little-known fact—people are constantly surprised by it, although one or two hon. Members are obviously aware of it because they referred to it—that, at many private airports—there is a long list of them which I do not have with me—air traffic control is already in private hands and has been for many years. It is regulated in the same way as air traffic control elsewhere and is working extremely effectively. Anyone who alleges that selling a stake in air traffic control to the private sector will make arrangements less safe must confront the fact that, already in a large number of airports, air traffic control is privately managed.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Is my hon. Friend aware that London Luton airport, which I am proud to represent, is one of those 18 airports that is not controlled by NATS and is already a public private partnership? It is one of the fastest growing United Kingdom airports. The Queen recently opened its second terminal. It employs an increasing number of my constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to maintain the confidence of air passengers who go through London Luton for the sake of the industry and our local economies?

Mr. Mullin: That is true of Luton and of others. A list has now mysteriously appeared in front of me. The other day I had the pleasure of visiting East Midlands airport. It is quite a large privately owned airport where air traffic control has been privately operated for many years and is working perfectly satisfactorily. There are at least 18 others, including Belfast, Blackpool, Bristol, Bournemouth, Coventry, Exeter, Guernsey, Humberside, Isle of Man, Jersey, London Luton, Liverpool, Leeds Bradford, Newcastle, Prestwick and Teesside. I know that some of those are small and I do not try to draw any too large conclusions, but some are considerable operations and have been working satisfactorily. In addition, the CAA already regulates the BAA and airlines that are in private hands. The CAA already has a lot of experience of regulating the private sector, so we are not breaking any new ground.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I hope that my hon. Friend will not misunderstand me when I say that to suggest that the operation of any one of his list of worthy and developing airports is equivalent to air traffic control over London is rather embarrassing. I hope that he will not persist.

Mr. Mullin: I am not suggesting that, of course. I said that I was not seeking to draw significant conclusions from it. But it is wrong to allege that the principle is somehow impossible, and that putting air traffic control into the private sector—albeit with state regulation, which is what we intend—introduces a huge new problem that has never before been confronted. That is all that I am saying—I put it no more strongly than that.

Mr. Gray: The Minister said a moment ago that the public-private partnership would, if anything, enhance safety. Is he suggesting that safety is less than 100 per cent? Presumably, he is. Secondly, will he tell us in precise detail how the proposed PPP will enhance safety?

Mr. Mullin: I am not alleging that safety is anything less than 100 per cent. at present. I am simply saying that we are in the market for any suggestions to enhance safety. A number of constructive suggestions have already come from interested parties. I mentioned one, which the hon. Gentleman may have missed—to have a director on the board of the new company with specific responsibility for safety. We will consider any other suggestions seriously.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) asked me about integration with military flights. Our proposals for air traffic control have been discussed with the Ministry of Defence, which is satisfied with the arrangements. We intend to ensure that the present excellent arrangements for co-operation between the military and civil air traffic control will be maintained. We shall lay an obligation on the National Air Traffic Services through its licence. NATS is negotiating a detailed contract for the delivery of joint and integrated services. I can give an assurance that the public-private partnership will have no adverse effect on the arrangements.

Miss McIntosh: The Minister answered the question by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). Could he also put my mind at rest that the Eurofighter will be fitted with the collision warning system that the Tornado has when it comes on stream in 2002?

Mr. Mullin: I am afraid that I cannot comment on that. If a note about that reaches me during the course of the debate, I shall certainly convey its contents. If not, I shall write to the hon. Lady. I assume that she would not want me to reply off the top off my head.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) made a number of sensible points. He referred to the huge pressure that will undoubtedly continue to be placed on those who work in the aviation industry by the exponential growth of the demand for air travel. There has been a 7 per cent. increase in recent years. He was right to say that it will put a great strain on the technology and on the personnel responsible for operating the technology. That is why we have to invest in new technology worth £1 billion. That is one reason—only one—why we are setting up a public-private partnership. It will require a radically new system. Incidentally, the technology is destined to go on changing—even when we have achieved the changes that will be made at Swanwick and Prestwick, that will not be the end of the matter. There are other, much larger, changes in the pipeline, and we have to be ready to meet them. That is another reason why we need to bring in the private sector.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) said that there was some confusion about the amount of money that we hoped to raise from the sale. He had, as he said, a cast-iron alibi for his non-attendance at the Select Committee the other day. The same alibi does not apply to the other two Conservative Members who were absent.

Miss McIntosh: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As the Chairman of the Select Committee knows only too well, I was seconded to serve by special request on the special procedures committee considering the Tunstall northern bypass Stoke-on-Trent compulsory

purchase order, and I have been doing that for six hours a day, four days a week, for the past three weeks. I was relieved from that duty only—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. That is a very interesting explanation for the hon. Lady's absence from the Committee, but it is hardly a point of order for the Chair.

Mr. Mullin: The hon. Lady has my deepest sympathies. I do not seek to make too much of this point, except to say that I was, in my previous incarnation, a Chairman of a Select Committee, and one or two Conservative Members, such as the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) take them very seriously. But some do not, and I was disappointed when I appeared before the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee the other day that not a single Conservative Member was present. It goes beyond disappointment and becomes galling when the very same Conservative Members crop up in the Chamber a few days later and demand the answers to questions that have been given elsewhere.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am happy to support the normal exchange of insults. However, all the Conservative members of the Select Committee had legitimate reasons not to attend. I hope that the Minister will not use my Committee as an excuse for this kind of exchange.

Mr. Mullin: I am grateful for that information. I think that we should now move on and keep within the spirit of the debate.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: No, I must move on, because I have only 10 minutes or so left, and hon. Members want replies to their questions.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire said that there was some confusion about how much money will be raised. No one can predict with certainty how much money will be raised from any sale of public assets. However, the £350 million estimated as the possible income from the sale of the 46 per cent. stake is exclusive of the debt. I hope that that is helpful.

The hon. Members for Poole, for Aldershot and for North Wiltshire referred to problems with the European Union. We all know the difficulties that some Conservative Members have with foreigners in general and the EU in particular. I have no intention of intruding on private grief, but a serious point was made, which was repeated by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson). Signing up to any future arrangements with Europe must not become an opportunity to dilute this country's very high standards. I entirely accept that. We will not agree to anything that undermines rather than raises standards.

Directives from Europe sometimes raise rather than lower standards. For example, environmental standards in this country used often to be lamentable, and we must be grateful to the EU for some of the measures that it forced the previous Government to adopt—albeit with some reluctance—and that we have adopted with rather more enthusiasm.

A point was made about the inspection of foreign aircraft, which was addressed to some extent in the Government's response to the report. We have doubled the budget for foreign aircraft inspections. We take the matter seriously, and hon. Members were right to raise it. We have agreed to an intensive programme of checks with the CAA. In the six months from 1 April, 56 checks were completed, which compares with 63 in the previous 12 months. The number of inspections is expected to accelerate over the winter months.

The safety regulation group works on the basis that hired foreign aircraft are expected to have safety levels equivalent to those in the United Kingdom. Rather than make general, untargeted checks, the group tends to concentrate on areas in which there is cause for concern.

Mr. Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not, as I have only five minutes left and have been generous in giving way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich was among hon. Members who referred to the allegation that a plane attempted to land at Heathrow with very little fuel in its tanks. It has not been possible to verify the allegations. The airline mentioned was Malaysia Airlines. Departmental officials met representatives of the airline to review its fuel policy, which the CAA judged to be in line with international requirements. In May, it was agreed that the airline should provide my Department with weekly fuel reports for all its aircraft, and it has done so.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) referred to the millennium.

Dr. Tonge *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Mullin: The hon. Lady shakes her head at me. Someone asked me to refer to it.

Mr. Brake *indicated assent.*

Mr. Mullin: I apologise to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), who asked me to confirm that we are millennium compliant. The UK industry is compliant. As regards foreign airlines, two—Gulf Air and Southern Aviation of Zambia—have yet to supply appropriate information. Those airlines have been advised that their permits will be suspended over the millennium if satisfactory information is not forthcoming.

Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, South, referred to concerns about the shortage of staff in the industry and training. Following publication of the Select Committee's report, an interdepartmental working group was established to consider what role the Government might play in supporting efforts to tackle the shortage of aircraft maintenance engineers, which we all agree is serious. The group has met three times—most recently on 13 December.

The hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) asked about air rage incidents. The Government have set up a working group on disruptive passengers. Our consciousness of this problem is relatively new, and we need to collect information on the scale of the problem so that we may analyse it. The CAA has been collecting data for six months, and I expect to receive an analysis of the figures early next year. I do not want to jump the gun until the information is before me.

[Mr. Mullin]

The hon. Member for Richmond Park referred to two extremely disturbing incidents that occurred over her constituency. I recall reading about those incidents in the newspapers at the time. Given what happened, I entirely understand the terms in which she expressed her concern on her constituents' behalf. Thankfully such incidents are extremely rare, although I appreciate that that is no consolation to anyone who happened to be involved. It is not always possible to identify the aircraft concerned, although it was possible in one of the two cases mentioned by the hon. Lady. The CAA works with all UK airlines to make sure that their aircraft are properly maintained and to enforce mandatory modifications to waste systems where necessary.

Terminal 5 was raised by the hon. Member for Richmond Park and several other hon. Members. The inspector completed his inquiries in March. He estimates that it will take him two years to write the report. It will arrive at my Department, therefore, in 2001. The hon. Lady asked whether the Government would accept its recommendations. It is normal practice to wait for a report before deciding whether to accept it. The most important thing is to get it right.

I repeat that I am conscious that I have not managed to address all the points raised in the debate, although I hope the House will concede that I have dealt with several. I refute the suggestion—

Question deferred, pursuant to paragraphs (4) and (5) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates) and Sessional Order of 25 October 1999 and resolution [29 November].

ESTIMATES DAY

[1st Allotted Day, 2nd Part]

Class XIII, Vote 1

Scotland Office

[Relevant documents: First Report from the Scottish Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99, Inward/Outward Investment in Scotland, HC 84, as it relates to the Estimate, and the response of the Government and the Scottish Executive thereto, HC 119 of Session 1999–2000; Departments of the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Forestry Commission Departmental Report 1999, Cm. 4215.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That a sum, not exceeding £5,810,419,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2001 for expenditure by the Scotland Office on administrative costs and operational costs; electoral publicity; the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Scotland; other devolution costs, including the panel to oversee the cross-party electoral expenditure agreement and on a grant to the Scottish Consolidated Fund.—*[Mrs. Anne McGuire.]*

4.55 pm

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): This is a unique debate. The report of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs on inward-outward investment in Scotland, which was printed on 24 June, exactly seven days before the Scottish Parliament came into operation, is the first report by a departmental Select Committee on one of the devolved areas of the United Kingdom to be debated on the Floor of the House.

The debate is also unique because it enables us to consider not only the response to our report by the UK Government, but the response of the Scottish Executive, both of which documents were ordered to be printed only yesterday and have been available only since 11 am today.

There is one more unique feature, inasmuch as we can also consider, and make references to, the memorandum of understanding and supplementary agreements between the United Kingdom Government, Scottish Ministers and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales, which was presented to Parliament by the Lord Chancellor in October, and the subsequent concordat between the Scottish Executive and the Department of Trade and Industry. Those are extremely important documents for the future of inward investment.

As a member of the Liaison Committee, I am grateful to my colleagues on the Committee for recommending the estimate for debate today. I am grateful also to all the members of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs representing all four parties, and to the Committee staff for all the hard work that went into the conduct of the inquiry and the compilation of the report. I thank our three specialist advisers, Professors Neil Hood and Stephen Young of Strathclyde university and Mr. Alf Young of *The Herald*.

Thanks are also due to all those who gave oral evidence to the Committee, and to all the individuals and organisations who submitted written memorandums or who participated in our informal visits in Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the United States.

Our report is published in three volumes. Its recommendations were agreed by all four parties represented on the Committee.

I know that many of my hon. Friends and colleagues on the Opposition Benches want to participate in the debate, which is restricted to two hours. I shall therefore be as brief as possible, but a number of points must be made.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has chosen to respond to the debate. As it progresses, I am confident that it will demonstrate the wisdom of the House in maintaining Select Committees such as ours to consider the vital aspects of reserved powers as they relate to matters such as those that we are discussing today, especially the roles of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as scrutinising the work of the Scotland Office. I am sure that my right hon. Friend welcomes that, just as he welcomes appearing before the Select Committee—at least, I think that he does.

The Committee's inquiry was a follow-up to a previous Committee inquiry in 1979–80 Session, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), now Scotland's First Minister, was its Chairman. This time, however, we added outward investment to the terms of reference. The Committee considered it important to revisit the report of almost 20 years to see what, if anything, had changed and what

progress, if any, had been made. It carried out that inquiry simultaneously with its inquiry into tourism. We were all impressed by the number of similarities between the two.

Although the majority of our 10 conclusions and recommendations relate to matters now devolved to the Scottish Parliament, there are important policy areas that are reserved to the UK Government, such as international relations and trading agreements, which have a vital influence on the operation of agencies such as Locate in Scotland and Scottish Trade International. I referred earlier to the roles of the DTI and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which are paramount in respect of both those bodies.

Despite devolution, many of the factors affecting the climate for inward investment are reserved—for example, designation of assisted areas, taxation, employment legislation, air transport liberalisation and, most important, the promotion of the UK as a whole to foreign investors.

Earlier, I referred to the memorandum of understanding and the concordats. It would have been useful for the Committee to have had those during the course of its inquiries, but it was not to be. None the less, our report is relevant. The memorandum and concordats set out common UK guidelines and consultation arrangements in respect of co-ordination of European policy issues, on financial assistance to industry, international relations and statistics.

The concordat on financial assistance to industry provides for consultation between the interested parties in each particular case before offers are made to large mobile investments where there is an interest in more than one part of the UK, where it is proposed to breach agreed financial limits, and where relocation from one part of the UK to another is involved. No doubt, other hon. Members will have something to say on some of those points.

The arrangements will be overseen by representatives of the UK Government and devolved Administrations, and will facilitate the exchange of information on financial assistance between both Administrations. Hopefully, those concordats create a level playing field. They will be essential in resolving any conflict that may arise in future, especially in view of the increased competition between the regional development agencies in England and their Scottish and Welsh counterparts.

The Committee was impressed by the professionalism of Locate in Scotland and the high regard in which it was held by everyone, including its competitors. Regardless of the future of Scottish Enterprise, I hope that Locate in Scotland will continue and that it will be adequately funded. That is essential to meet the ever-increasing worldwide competition for whatever inward investment projects there are to be won.

I welcome the general tenor of the Government's response to our report and their agreement with most of our findings. I especially welcome the apparent good will and co-operation between the Secretary of State's office and that of the Scottish Executive, and the desire to work together for the benefit of Scotland. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) may laugh, but he should not believe everything that he reads in the press. The good will is there and the report proves that, particularly the responses from the Government and the Scottish Executive.

That bodes well for the Chancellor's most welcome announcement about the establishment of joint action committees and for the Select Committee's desire to work closely with the Scottish Parliament's social inclusion committee on our inquiry into poverty in Scotland.

I also welcome the Scottish Executive's response. They do not agree with some of the Committee's findings, but they accept and welcome others. In general, they accept that our report was on the right lines and appear to be moving towards making the changes that we suggested. It is always interesting to note the way in which movement is described, which in this case would appear to suggest that it was always intended, regardless of any Select Committee inquiry.

I am deeply disappointed at the Scottish Executive's response on transport issues in paragraph 5. All the evidence given to us highlighted the need for the completion of the last six miles of the M74 in Glasgow, much of it in my constituency. For economic, environmental and social reasons, that should have been the number 1 priority in the roads programme in Scotland. It would protect many existing jobs, open up many hundreds, if not more than a thousand, acres of derelict land for development, and create the potential for several thousand new jobs, as well as removing a malignant eyesore on the surface of Glasgow. It would relieve pressure on the Kingston bridge and reduce congestion and pollution in the city centre, resulting in huge environmental improvements. It would also reduce road accidents, especially for children and old people, especially, again, in my constituency due to the high volumes of through traffic which really should not be there and would not be there if the M74 were completed.

The Scottish Executive has suggested that the local authorities should take the project forward themselves, but that inevitably means road tolls, which would defeat the whole purpose, would add substantial cost to industry and would definitely not be an incentive to inward investment.

Equally, the UK Government need to ensure that the north of England above Birmingham, Scotland and Northern Ireland benefit from good rail and road connections to their major markets, especially in respect of perishable products and products with a short shelf life. We should not forget that the A75 from Gretna to Stranraer is Northern Ireland's main link with Europe.

We are familiar with recent reports, which highlighted the north-south and east-west divides in unemployment, poverty and health. Unfortunately, for reasons that other Labour Members understand only too well, my constituency is at the top of the list, closely followed by most of the other Glasgow constituencies. It is therefore incredible that the Glasgow development agency, the Glasgow Alliance—I confess to being a board member—and Glasgow city council did not make submissions to the Select Committee, despite being told about our inquiry. That is unacceptable, given that Glasgow lost the equivalent of Ravenscraig almost every year for almost 20 years until 1997, and that inward investment to Glasgow almost never meant manufacturing jobs but instead service sector jobs. Those bodies should have made an input into the inquiry, and must accept the blame for not getting their act together and doing so. I make no apology for publicly criticising them. I hope that they will learn from their mistake and do their utmost on behalf of the city.

[Mr. David Marshall]

Since 1997, Labour's record in attracting inward investment to Scotland has been outstanding. From May 1997 to date, inward investment has amounted to more than £2 billion and an estimated 30,000 jobs. That success is due to economic growth and the stable economy that the Government established, and to Labour ending the Tory years of boom and bust and 18 wasted years for Scotland. It is also due to the partnership between the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Executive and various agencies, and to devolving decision making to local levels. Devolution will enable Scotland to continue attracting record rates of investment. The nationalists would put all that at risk by divorcing Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I do not belittle the success of the past two years—although not of the past year—in attracting inward investment to Scotland. In the past year, inward investment has decreased. Statistics clearly show that the years 1991 to 1997 constituted a record period of investment and exponential growth. That happened under a Conservative Government.

Mr. Marshall: If the hon. Gentleman knew anything about Scotland, he would hesitate to point out any possible deficiencies in a period of two years when, for 18 years, the people of Scotland suffered at the hands of his Government.

The nationalists would put the success of the past two and a half years at risk by divorcing Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom and cutting off Scottish business men from their biggest single market. Divorce can be costly.

The report acknowledged the need to attract high-tech, highly skilled research and development and added-value jobs, but we also appreciate the need to attract any sort of job. A job is a job, especially for someone who is desperate to get one, as most unemployed people in Scotland are. I warmly welcome the Government's measures such as the new deal, priority for education and training, the national minimum wage and investment in people. They will help to equip the people of Scotland to maintain and improve its attractiveness as a major destination for inward investment, thus helping to ensure and contribute to its future prosperity. If our Select Committee inquiry and report have also helped, even in a small way, they will have been worth while.

5.9 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), on whose Select Committee I served for the first two and a half years of the Parliament. The inquiry was especially important, and I was pleased to sign up to the report at its conclusion.

Economic development in Scotland, as well as in the whole of the United Kingdom, has always been a key point of political debate and, as the exchanges across the Floor of the House have shown, inward investment is a key aspect of that debate. In its inquiry, the Committee sought to strip away some of the myths that have undoubtedly grown up around sensitive issues such as inward investment and tried to get to the core of the arguments: whether inward investment is a good thing; whether Scotland has become over-dependent on it; and whether we can expect to sustain the quality and nature of the investment that we enjoy. A number of those themes were usefully explored and I want to highlight in particular the fact that the nature of investment and the types of future direct foreign investment that we may hope to attract to Scotland will change. The assembly operations that have been a feature of inward investment over the past 20 years will decline in significance over the next 10 or 20 years and, notwithstanding the comment of the hon. Member for Shettleston that a job is a job, the nature and availability of some of those jobs will certainly change.

The location of the investment in Scotland has also caused great concern and great argument. We have different perspectives because we represent different parts of the country, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, at times, it has seemed as though the inward investment that we have enjoyed has been focused on particular areas. Although Glasgow may have been badly neglected, those of us who represent rural parts of Scotland feel that that is the case for our areas as well.

The world economy is changing, we are losing some of our old industries and Scotland's economic shape is different from that at the beginning of the 1980s, when a previous Select Committee considered this issue. One of the most encouraging aspects of our inquiry was the fact that many of the lessons and warning signals that we were told about were actively being tackled by Locate in Scotland. Like many other members of the Committee, I pay tribute to the hard work that it does around the world and the extremely high success rate that it has achieved over many years. The highlight in that respect is the Project Alba development and the idea that Scotland can be at the forefront of the very industries—

Mr. Grieve: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He congratulated Locate in Scotland and I heartily endorse that but, in view of the comments made by the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), does he agree with the statistics provided by it showing that the highest level of planned investment ever recorded in Scotland—£3.1216 billion—was made in 1996-97?

Mr. Moore: I have no desire at all to enter into a sterile party political debate; I want to focus on these different and dynamic types of inward investment. I spent the first few minutes of my speech explaining that the nature of inward investment in Scotland is changing and one year's statistics are irrelevant two years down the line. I repeat the invitation made by the hon. Member for Shettleston: the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) should visit Scotland and see these places for himself.

The Committee's report referred to the first-class support that exists, but I want to focus briefly on a couple of themes before discussing an issue that is of particular concern to me and to my constituents—it lies at the heart of some of the remaining problems that we have with inward investment. I have touched briefly on the idea that the rural parts of Scotland have traditionally lost out, although I acknowledge the efforts of then Scottish Office and, in particular, the Minister of State, Scotland Office to respond to the difficulties in the Borders over the past

18 months to two years. A rural unit was established in Locate in Scotland, but my concern is that, because it has only a couple of people, it will be hard pressed to tackle the issues seriously unless it comes under the new Scottish Executive arrangements. It must be able to attract significant and realistic resources for the next few years.

When we spoke to the professionals in the United Kingdom, when we were in the United States and when we met Locate in Scotland officials, we were told time and again that it would not matter what we did to point people in a particular direction. Ultimately, companies would decide for themselves where they would go, and would be influenced by the existing criteria and what was available to people in the part of the world that was involved. Such companies would have a number of requirements, but transport links and the transport infrastructure in a given area would rank high in their list of priorities. Those of us who represent the more rural parts of Scotland are very conscious of the fact that that immediately disadvantages us.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Is it not the case that an area that is not close to one of the new towns will also be denied access to potential investment? Part of the "cluster syndrome" is geographical, in that it focuses on new towns. My constituency includes Clackmannanshire, which is surrounded by about three new towns, and which is also a black hole down which a good deal of investment seems to disappear. The investment goes elsewhere, and I think that the Borders suffers from the same problem.

Mr. Moore: The hon. Gentleman has made a valid point. There are a number of reasons why inward investors are attracted to particular areas, including tax regimes and the available incentives. There is also the question of numbers, to which I shall return in due course. Like the hon. Member for Shettleston, I am glad that the Secretary of State will respond to the debate. I urge him to use his influence, and his co-ordinating and championing roles, to ensure that transport links within Scotland, and between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, are not neglected, and are developed further.

The main point that I want to make relates to the sad case of Viasystems. I refer hon. Members to paragraph 47 of the report, which gives a brief resumé of some of the difficulties faced by my constituencies in the light of that case. The loss of 1,000 jobs from the Viasystems site has been the worst single industrial disaster in the Borders in 30 years. As paragraph 47 of the report makes clear, the issues at stake with those job losses lie at the heart of the debate on whether inward investment has been good for Scotland, and whether competition between different parts of the United Kingdom has always been handled in the most positive and constructive manner.

Viasystems was the final incarnation of the idea of a company that was indigenous, in the Borders, and built up from scratch over 30 years. When it was taken over by what I can only politely describe as a bunch of unscrupulous American corporate financiers, it was clear that they intended to close down the sites on the Borders, and to move both jobs and contracts to other parts of the United Kingdom.

At an early stage, what concerned us most was the fact that Viasystems had also taken on ownership of International Systems Ltd. in north Tyneside, just across the border. It had received a Government grant of £12 million. The project to build the facility and recruit people to do jobs was incomplete at the time when Viasystems was acquired, which allowed it to make serious strategic decisions about the way in which it would organise its business in future. Viasystems was provided with a state-of-the-art facility in an area that was increasingly concentrating its resources and was very capital intensive, while just up the road there was older equipment, and no hope of competing in terms of the economies of scale.

It was with some nervousness that those of us in the Borders learned of the strategic vision presented to the backers in the United States. We learned that Viasystems wanted to control the world market in printed circuit boards. We may all have our views about people who set out to dominate the world. It often ends in tears, and many of them have been shed in my part of the world.

Early in 1998, Viasystems announced a series of poor results. It clearly overestimated its ability to acquire and integrate new facilities successfully. It was not helped by a world downturn. We were concerned. My hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) accompanied me to meetings to discuss the poor results and the threat of redundancies, talk of which was beginning.

Information began to trickle out from management, unions and employees not only that wholesale redundancies were in prospect, but that, early in 1998, several contracts were already being passed to north Tyneside. Expertise was being shipped out, at a cost to people trained to do highly technical and specialist work that had previously been done in the Borders.

On 19 May 1998, I wrote to the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson). I commented in the letter:

> "There can be little doubt that business is being diverted from plants such as Selkirk and Galashiels to maximise the efficiency of the new site."

Early on, we were giving warnings and alerting Government to the fact that there was a serious problem.

Later that summer, we had further bad news. We had already lost 200 or 300 jobs and we began to hear rumours that the sites might be closed in their entirety. With my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, I led a delegation to St. Louis, Missouri, the location of Viasystems worldwide headquarters. We had assistance from unions, the local enterprise company and the local council. We went there in the hope of finding out what Viasystems had in store for us. Our anxiety was simply that, with the facility in north Tyneside, it was going to be able to close our local factories.

Before we went, we had a meeting with Lord MacDonald of Tradeston, the Minister with responsibility for trade and industry at the Scotland Office. I have subsequently been able to get hold of the Scotland Office minutes for that meeting, which confirms my recollection of the occurrence.

I do wish to refer to the civil servant who was talking at the time by name—I pay tribute to the civil servants,

[Mr. Moore]

who tried hard to work with us to find a solution—but he said at the meeting:

"The factory was still being kitted out and built up to full production levels"—

this was in August 1998—

"but, again, the payment of grant would be dependent on both the company's ability to prove that products within the North of England were not simply being substituted for those previously produced in the Scottish Borders, nor were redundancies taking place in Scotland at the same time as government grant was being paid out in England. There had to be a clear definition that these were new lines of work, and it would be the DTI's responsibility to check carefully that this was the case. The Scottish Office would be liaising closely with the DTI to ensure that this condition was fully met."

At that point, we felt that we had at least some support and that there was at least some hope of ensuring that the corporation would not abuse the inward investment rules to ensure advantage for one part of the country over another. Sadly, as many hon. Members will be aware, our trip to St. Louis was not successful and, ultimately, the decision was taken to close those factories.

At that point, I began to call for a public inquiry, so that we could learn some lessons from what had been a devastating time in the Borders, the scars of which are still evident to anyone who visits the area. On different occasions, I requested public inquiries. The right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), now Scottish First Minister, rebuffed those and said that nothing had been revealed at internal inquiries.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry requesting that he carry out an inquiry and make the findings public. I got a response from the then Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills). He said:

"I can assure you that the grant offered by DTI for the plant in the North East stands independently of any transfers of work from existing facilities in the UK".

That immediately contradicts the assurance that we had been given only months before at the Scottish Office meeting.

In the same letter, the then Trade and Industry Minister commented:

"Our monitoring of the project will ensure that the new jobs are created in accordance with the offer and that we do not pay for work simply transferred from the Borders."

I tell the Secretary of State and other hon. Members that no one in the Borders believes that that investigation has been done, and no one accepts that the jobs in the north Tyneside plant have been created other than at the expense of the Borders.

Most recently, we started to believe that we had hit our head against a brick wall for the final time. On 7 April 1999, the right hon. Member for Anniesland wrote to me and said:

"payment of that grant by DTI has been carefully monitored to ensure that it is not being used to assist the transfer of work from the Borders to Newcastle."

He again rejected the call for a public inquiry.

There has, however, been a further piece of correspondence—and perhaps devolution has taken its toll. Ultimately, we have had a letter from the Scottish Executive's Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning—the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish)—who recently wrote:

"I can confirm there is no condition attached to the grant precluding workers from any particular area taking jobs created on the Viasystems (Tyneside) site. Equally, the monitoring of the grant does not require a check on the previous employment of any of the workers."

All that correspondence, and all the notes of meetings that we have obtained, point to one fact: whatever has happened in the Scottish Office—now the Scottish Executive and the Scotland Office—the DTI is not signed up to the internal inquiries. Indeed, decisions being taken by the Scottish Executive seem to show that they are washing their hands of the entire process. I very much regret that.

The matter has left in the public mind an impression of complete mess and a feeling of utter disappointment. The public inquiry that I have called for, and that has been supported by other hon. Members, is needed now more than ever. I am not simply hoping that we shall be able to return to the previous position—no one believes that that is possible—but it would be helpful if Ministers would admit that mistakes have been made, and perhaps even apologise to those who have lost their jobs. Most importantly, we want to learn lessons for the future.

It would be unfortunate if I were not to highlight the fact that there have been some positive responses—many positive responses—from the Scotland Office and the Scottish Executive. A working party has examined the devastation associated with Viasystems and with the many other hundreds of jobs that have been lost in textiles and farming. There has also been additional funding for Scottish Borders Enterprise and relaxation of capital constraints for the local council. However, the process is slow, and many people in the area are extremely unhappy and worried that, eventually, those measures will replace the many thousands of jobs that were lost.

The report is good and constructive, and it offers the House a valuable insight into the changing market for inward investment into the United Kingdom generally. More than anything else, however, it highlights the fact that there are still many lessons to be learned about inward investment into Scotland and into the United Kingdom generally.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Many hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, and, unless the remaining speeches are reasonably brief, many people will be very disappointed.

5.28 pm

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I shall certainly attempt to be brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker—please make throat-cutting motions at me if I am not.

Just as I know that there are other planets circling other suns millions of miles away, although I have never seen one, I know that there are inward-investing firms creating thousands of jobs in Scotland, although I have never seen one in Maryhill. I never expected the Tories to care; and, now, things are beginning to be a bit better. I am hoping that things will be a lot better, and hope to hear some constructive comments at the end of the debate from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Although the report's recommendations are probably very sensible for Scotland generally, I honestly cannot say that they seem very relevant to much of my constituency or to other deprived areas around Glasgow. Glasgow has far too few substantial factories employing hundreds and owned by indigenous companies or inward investors. The biggest employers in my constituency are the public services. Scotland has a huge range of manufacturing jobs. They do not require exceptional skills or qualifications and can be sited anywhere, so I ask myself why those jobs are not coming to Glasgow.

The Government have been successful in dealing with sudden job losses caused by factory closures in many parts of Scotland. In one or two cases, they have been so successful that the area has ended up with more jobs than it had to start with. The problem for Glasgow is that it lost thousands of jobs years and even decades ago. We need a task force to attract manufacturing jobs back in. I should like the Secretary of State to discuss that proposal with the Scottish Executive. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's view that jobs are the main way out of poverty. There are just not enough jobs in Glasgow. I want more private sector jobs in my constituency and in the city as a whole. I do not accept that that cannot be done.

Today, we heard the splendid news that Scotland's dole queue fell last month to a 23-year low. The number of unemployed is down by 25,000 compared with a year ago. Glasgow's unemployment figures have fallen from 15 per cent. in 1996–97 to 13.5 per cent. in 1997–98, but the city's unemployment rate, currently 6.8 per cent., is still double that of Scotland as a whole. Unemployment in my constituency stood at 10.1 per cent. in April this year. That is an improvement on 1997, when it was 13.6 per cent, but it is still too high.

A lot of the jobs that have come to Glasgow are in call centres. They are low paid because employers know that people are desperate for work. If it were not for Labour's national minimum wage policy, a lot of people who are in work would be far worse off than they are.

The in phrase now is "drive to move up the value chain". Many of my constituents would like to be on the first rung of that chain. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) has pointed out, the three-volume report devotes only half a page to Glasgow, dealing with the contribution from the regeneration fund on micro-enterprises. That fund has only £3 million to spend on Castlemilk, Drumchapel, the east end, north Glasgow, Gorbals, Govan, Greater Easterhouse and Greater Pollok. That sum should be looked at afresh.

The Federation of Small Businesses recently proposed the creation of a Scottish enterprise development bank to overcome the problem of the conservative attitudes of the major banks' lending policies. Perhaps we could consider that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston has said, the Glasgow agencies failed to respond to the request to offer evidence to the Committee. I have not had time to find out why. Perhaps they all thought that someone else was doing it. I would have liked to hear their views on shipbuilding. Glasgow Members have lost count of the number of times that Govan or Yarrows have had to look for support to win a necessary contract. The world needs ships and they are being built elsewhere. We hear reasons why the contracts go out of the country. Sometimes there are allegations that other Governments are less punctilious than ours about competition rules, although our Government say that that is not the case.

Somehow our city, which led the way in shipbuilding, is not getting its share of the world market. There is a history of under-investment to explain the loss of the trade in earlier years, but now I am told that our yards are as high-tech as any in the world, so I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would consider commissioning a study of what our yards need to do to get back a decent share of the world trade in shipbuilding.

The Minister of State, Scotland Office, responded to an earlier plea of mine by creating a new addition to regional selective assistance of £3,000 per head for every new job taken up by a person living in a deprived area. When I last asked what had resulted from that very progressive initiative, which I greatly welcomed, I learned that some money had indeed been paid out, but none in Glasgow. I wonder whether employers are aware of it and are still saying no to investment in our poorer areas. If they are, we need to know what the employers are saying and then consider how to respond. This is information that we do not appear to have.

One critical point in the report is that RSA focuses on the number of jobs created, rather than the quality, and does nothing to create high-quality jobs. There are some high-quality jobs in my constituency in the science park, but they are held in the main by people who live outside Glasgow and pay their council taxes outside Glasgow.

Too many constituents in Maryhill and Glasgow generally have left school with few or no qualifications. Hardly anyone attends further education and higher education is rare for school leavers. There are problems in getting jobs that are appropriate for people who lack qualifications.

Today's newspapers carry a story about the Scottish Parliament's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee criticising confusion, overlap and duplication among the hundreds of agencies involved in support for enterprise, and the call for them to work together. This is already happening in Glasgow, with all the relevant agencies formed into an alliance. However, unemployment is twice the Scottish average. We have to take a fresh look at how to tackle that.

Glasgow's job-creating efforts are not working as successfully as I would like. I would like a detailed examination of why so few manufacturing companies looking for a suitable site end up in Glasgow. I know that they like greenfield sites, but we have plenty of attractions to offer. I wonder why it is not happening.

The problem in Maryhill and constituencies like it is one of poverty that jobs can overcome. Just now, there is a lot of prosperity in our country and the shop windows are full of goodies, but too many of my constituents have no hope of enjoying much festive fare. Many good moves have been made by this Government in a short space of time—the working families tax credit, higher child benefit and the national minimum wage, to name only a few. However, we need jobs. I hope that we will get on with it and make a concentrated effort where needs are greatest.

It is a long time since Maryhill had a boom, and too many of my constituents are bust. Let us have an end to boom and bust. It is time for action for Glasgow.

5.37 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe)—not least because I spent a large amount of my childhood in my parents' car outside Mr. and Mrs. Moreland's butcher's shop in Maryhill road—I hope that is still there—which sold the best beef in Britain.

May I apologise to the House, and to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the fact that I will not be able to stay for the winding-up speeches, as I have been called away on other business?

I wanted to take part in the debate because inward investment in Scotland is very important to me. The last thing that my father said to me before he died was, "Do not neglect the Kirk, nor forget Scotland." I fear that I may have done the former—not least because I attend the Church of England, for my sins, in North Wiltshire—but I have not done the second. Once a Scot, always a Scot, I believe. Despite the fact that I represent an English constituency, the interests of Scotland—and of my mother and relations, who live in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire)—are always at the forefront of my mind, despite my strong English credentials when I speak on English matters.

Some of my right hon. and hon. Friends and I are concerned about a number of aspects of inward investment in Scotland. The statistics produced by the Locate in Scotland annual review show that projects came to a peak in 1993–94, at 97 a year, and the figure is now down to 78. Planned investment, which peaked in 1996–97 at £3.1 billion, is now down to only £761 million. Planned jobs, having peaked around the time of the general election, have declined considerably. Those statistics are worrying.

Although I am not a member of the Select Committee, I thought that I might reflect on why those problems have occurred. There are three possible reasons. The first is the devolutionary muddle, as I see it. I have made no secret of the fact that, unlike the rest of my party, I am wholeheartedly opposed to the devolutionary settlement that the Government have imposed on my home country. The second reason is tax and regulation, and the third is transport.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Is not the downturn in the south-east Asian economy the most significant factor in the decrease in inward investment in the past couple of years?

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman may be right. I was not proposing an encyclopaedic tour of all the reasons for the decrease; there may be many.

Inward investment has declined considerably this year compared with the previous two and with its peak under the previous Government. One gets tired of constantly hearing about boom and bust. The hon. Member for Maryhill mentioned it. The truth is that the statistics demonstrate that inward investment in Scotland was much better under the so-called boom-and-bust Conservative Government. Let us lay that ghost to rest.

I want to discuss the devolution muddle, as I would describe it. It is peculiar that a Select Committee of the House produced the report but the response came partly from the Government and partly from the Scottish Executive. Will the Secretary of State carry back the messages of this debate to the Scottish Executive and, more importantly, will that Executive listen to him? If press reports are anything to judge by, one is not entirely certain that it listens all that carefully to him.

As an observer of these matters, I find it hard to work out what the Secretary of State's job is and what the purpose of the Select Committee and indeed the Grand Committee can be post devolution. It is all a bit of a muddle, and I hope that he may clear some of it up.

What happens when there is a policy dispute between the Scottish Executive and the UK Government? Labour Members may say that there is no problem because that is all dealt with clearly in the concordats and memorandums, but what happens when a company is being courted by both England and Scotland and the UK Government want the investment to go to England? Who would get the investment?

Labour Members may say that we have gone through all the great mechanism of the concordats precisely to sort that out. That may work—possibly—while there is a Labour Government in Edinburgh and a Labour Government in Westminster. I concede that there is likely to be a Labour Government or a Lib-Lab pact in Scotland—the Liberals may have some other view on that—for some time, although I think back happily to the time when my cousin was the Conservative Member for Glasgow, Govan, so let us not laugh too much about the Scottish Conservative revival. *[Interruption.]* Let us assume that there will be a Labour Government in Scotland for some time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. This is absurd. The hon. Gentleman should be heard.

Mr. Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

What happens when there is a Labour Government in Edinburgh and a Conservative Government in Westminster, as will inevitably occur sooner or later? *[Interruption.]* Their febrile and fragile laughter suggests that Government Members may foresee that occasion coming sooner than some of the commentators would have us believe. What will happen to the concordats and memorandums then? If Government Members are saying that that will never happen, what has happened to their view of democracy? They are saying in their arrogant, new Labour way that there will never again be a Conservative Government because new Labour will run the world for ever and ever. The electorate will ensure that that arrogant approach comes back to haunt them.

Conservative Members do not believe that the concordats will prove to be sufficiently robust to withstand a fundamental disagreement between the two Governments.

I have concerns about inward investment in Scotland because of what the Government have done with taxes and regulations on business. Without any question, tax on business has greatly increased. The British Chambers of Commerce have calculated that costs for business will be increased by £30 billion by regulations introduced in this Parliament. Statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, available from the Library, demonstrate that the annual increase in UK productivity has declined since the general election, from 2.2 per cent. between 1992 and 1997 to an average rise

this year of 0.7 per cent. I mentioned the Scottish figures earlier, but those that I have just mentioned show that the UK figures have also fallen.

The worrying fall in productivity, together with the rise in regulation, leads to loss of competitiveness. Indeed, in the world competitiveness league, Britain has fallen from fourth under the Conservatives to eighth under Labour. The Government must say why Britain is becoming less competitive and why Scotland, in particular, is suffering. British industry now produces 40 per cent. less per man hour than US firms and about 20 per cent. less than the French and the Germans.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Does my hon. Friend agree that Scotland will suffer especially from the unparalleled rises in road fuel duty charges, given its greater distances? Does he also agree that some heavy goods industries in cities in Scotland will suffer disproportionately from the Government's proposed energy tax?

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend is right. His point about the climate change levy—or energy tax, as it should be called—is pertinent. It is interesting that the Government appear to be listening to their Back Benchers and backing off slightly, but the energy tax will still cost the steel industry—which especially affects Scotland—£20 million a year.

The president of the CBI, Clive Thompson, has said that the increase in taxation introduced by the Labour Government has amounted to much more than the sums that they give back, which are "trivial by comparison". How much worse that will be when the energy tax arrives. Bill Midgley, the president of the north-east chambers of commerce, has said:

"It was disappointing that there was no mention of moves to reduce the amount of bureaucracy which is stifling business competitiveness."

Tax and regulation are going up, but competitiveness is going down. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members are chattering, but they should listen to what Scottish Energy has said of the energy tax:

"The Chancellor is doing what he does best—playing the three card trick. We are still concerned about the burden on the manufacturing industry because only energy intensive users are eligible for the discount quoted."

In other words, Scotland will be especially heavily hit by the energy tax.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) mentioned transport issues, which are already affecting inward investment in Scotland. The Government's response to the Committee's report has been disappointing. Fuel duties remain, despite the Chancellor's brave attempt to pretend that he will do away with them. According to the Red Book attached to the pre-Budget report, fuel duties will increase next year. Scotland is vastly more affected than anywhere else in the UK by that disproportionate increase in petrol and diesel.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): The hon. Gentleman is pursuing an interesting line of argument. Were those arguments valid when the Conservative Government applied the fuel duty escalator many more times than even this disreputable Labour Government have done?

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. He was not here at the time but, if he had been, he would have remembered that the Conservative Government introduced the fuel duty escalator at 3 per cent., straightforwardly to raise revenue. The then Chancellor said that he needed to raise more revenue for schools, hospitals and other things, so he would introduce a fuel duty escalator. This Government have put it up to 7 per cent. and, in the last Budget, the Chancellor said that it would continue indefinitely, although it is a bizarre escalator that never stops. The Government may be backing off it now, but the figures in the Red Book show a 4.6 per cent. increase in fuel duty year on year from now onwards.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I know that the hon. Gentleman would not want inadvertently to mislead the House. The Conservatives brought in the escalator at 2 per cent. and they immediately raised it to 3 per cent. They then raised it to 5 per cent. and, in a Green Paper just before the last election, they pledged that they would keep the fuel duty escalator. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made it clear that he will not keep the fuel duty escalator. To complete the facts, of the 85p in the pound that is charged in fuel duty, 79p was imposed by the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his clarification of the fact that we brought in the escalator at 2 per cent. However, he repeats a worryingly misleading remark that the Chancellor of the Exchequer made in the pre-Budget statement. The Chancellor suggested that, somehow or other, he was ending the escalator. He is not; he is continuing it. All that he said was that he would hypothecate the extra and would use it for transport.

There has been an interesting development in Labour party thinking. The Secretary of State for Scotland appears to be saying that the price of petrol will rise only by the rate of inflation—

Dr. Reid *rose—*

Mr. Gray: Will the Secretary of State hold on for a moment? My understanding of what the Secretary of State said is that the Chancellor has committed himself to increasing the price of petrol only by the rate of inflation year on year and that the increase will no longer be automatically higher than the rate of inflation. If that is what he is saying, how does he explain the figures in the table at the back of the Red Book that show a 4.6 per cent. increase in fuel duty income year on year, both for next year and the year after that?

Dr. Reid: I can help the hon. Gentleman, who obviously supported a mechanism when the previous Government were in office that he did not understand. The difference with an automatic fuel duty escalator is that it rises automatically one year after another; it does not rise because of a year-on-year choice. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has now abolished the duty. Moreover, he has said that, should there be, in any given year, any increase over inflation, that will be ring-fenced and put into transport. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman to understand the policy that he apparently supported without understanding for six years.

Mr. Gray: I shall not rise to the Secretary of State's amusingly patronising manner. If he is suggesting that

[Mr. Gray]

petrol prices will not increase by more than the rate of inflation and that all the increase will be used for transport, which is not otherwise being provided for by the Government, I challenge him to return to the House after the next Budget when, without question, he will find that the price of petrol has gone up by far more than the rate of inflation. People in Scotland will thus pay disproportionately more because of the distances involved in travelling in Scotland.

I am surprised to hear the Secretary of State justify the huge increases in petrol prices. In Scotland, petrol now costs £3.50, £3.60 and £3.70 a gallon, and I remember the days when my father used to fill up his car for 10 bob. A price of £3.50 a gallon is extraordinary and it bears down disproportionately on Scotland.

I have a final point about transport. The Secretary of State says that all the money will be hypothecated. The important things about hypothecation are that it is permanent and that it provides additional money. We heard how little investment there has been in the transport infrastructure in Scotland, and the Select Committee went to some length to say how poor it was. Several hon. Members have said that they regret the fact that the response has not been better on that front. I therefore challenge the Secretary of State to commit the Government, without any deviation, to ring-fence all the extra revenue that may be raised through any increase in petrol duty next year for transport infrastructure in Scotland. Will he also specify what he will do after next year's Budget that he would not otherwise have done? In doing that, he will have to say that he will not provide the infrastructure that the Select Committee has called for.

Inward investment in Scotland has declined because of the devolution muddle that I talked about and because of the significant increase in taxes and regulation that the Government have introduced nationally since they came to power two and a half years ago. Most significantly, the Government's muddle over transport—they have had four Transport Ministers, and the Secretary of State was one of them—and their failure to invest in the transport infrastructure of Scotland are having a worrying effect on inward investment.

5.54 pm

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I am delighted to be able to speak in the debate and particularly to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) and his Committee for a worthwhile and substantial report.

I have been keen to focus on certain issues over the years and they have been mentioned in the report. The first is inward investment and after care. The line between inward investment and investment by indigenous companies is becoming increasingly blurred. For example, 60 per cent. of all inward investment is reinvestment by existing companies. The need to focus on that is very important.

Secondly, there is the issue of added value. Scotland used to be called a branch economy for inward investing companies—hopefully no more. The focus must be on research and development and on local sourcing. If we get that right—so far, too little attention has been paid to the matter—we will create many thousands more jobs in Scotland.

We must also consider the links between universities and industry. I recall the invention in the 1960s of flat-panel technology at Dundee university. The benefits of the technology were not produced or sourced there, with the result that more than 40,000 jobs are scattered around the world that should be in Scotland. Scottish Enterprise and the higher education institutions have looked at developing links between universities and the world of business and industry, but we have yet to move from analysis to action.

The report mentions one-stop shops. Some years ago, I recall making inquiries about Glasgow in that regard and discovering that people wanting to set up a business could make about 80 separate lines of inquiry. There is therefore an awful long way to go before a one-stop shop can be established.

I was delighted that the report suggested that Scottish Trade International and Locate in Scotland should merge. Another factor in that discussion is Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) is making faces at me, but there is a need for a strategic competence covering the whole of Scotland. That could be achieved by combining Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, while still retaining the distinctive elements of the latter organisation.

Finally, there is the question of the duplication of services on offer from local enterprise companies, local authorities, enterprise trusts and other local bodies. We must get that right if we are to focus on economic development at local level. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) is right to say that there is no evidence of inward investment in many areas in Scotland. It is very important that we get that happening at local level.

As for the present—and future—economic environment, we are on the verge of the knowledge economy. Through the internet, technologies for computers, telecommunications and broadcasting technologies are starting to converge. The result is that our lives and life styles are going to change enormously.

For example, British Telecom has declared that it wants to source as much of its services as possible on the internet. In one year, that will save the company £70 million, and other companies are clearly going to follow suit. That will have implications for jobs, our town centres and for the way in which we do our business. We have not got around to thinking about that in Scotland yet, but e-commerce will affect how business is done.

I visited Lindendale university in St. Louis recently. It has a student population of 8,000, and its president, Denis Spellman, told me that the university would have to change enormously as a result of the knowledge economy and e-commerce. The report contains echoes of that prediction. In paragraph 114, it states:

"It is not enough to have excellent universities unless their output can be harnessed for the wider benefit of Scotland. This is not a uniquely Scottish problem; we heard in Virginia of the problems of bringing together to their mutual benefit a university culture whose roots are in the middle ages and whose time-scale is based on university terms and a technological one which thinks in web-hours and in which 'instant gratification is too slow'".

The way in which business develops therefore has enormous implications for our universities.

One area on which the report did not focus, but on which we should focus more, is the need to develop our local economy and to promote and develop small

businesses. In America, the success of the Clinton presidency was based on the development of 8 million jobs in small businesses during his first term. At the Glasgow chamber of commerce dinner a few weeks ago, Peter Sutherland, the ex-commissioner, mentioned that, every year in America, 900,000 businesses are set up. At the end of the year, 800,000 go out of business, but that means that 100,000 new businesses are set up every year. Scotland has not had a culture of starting new businesses, giving people confidence to develop their businesses and go through the pain barrier, and helping them develop. We need to do that. Yes, there are good ideas in Scotland but how do we harness them into developing businesses and keep them going? That is the big secret. In the 21st century, the economy will depend on the development of small businesses. It can be called entrepreneurship and it is important that schools and universities focus on it.

A few weeks ago I read a book by Charles Handy called "The New Alchemists", in which he looks at entrepreneurs. Oswald Boateng, Charles Dunstane of the Car Warehouse company and Richard Branson left school without qualifications but with ideas. Somebody nurtured and encouraged them to develop their ideas. We need to do that in Scotland. In the 21st century, we will do that through our information and communications technology. We should widen the curriculum and ensure that we are ready to take advantage of future opportunities.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston said, we need infrastructure. I agree that the M74 is an important link because I want Scottish goods to get to our most important European market—England. It is important, too, if we are to get the benefits of the Single European Act, which Baroness Thatcher signed us up for in 1985, by putting our goods into Europe. We are not doing that sufficiently well now.

I draw to the Secretary of State's attention a local issue. Last year, the J & B Whisky plant in my constituency was closed. To date, the Government have provided good help. Diageo, the company that closed it, West Dumbarton council, Dumbartonshire Enterprise and I are working very closely together to see if we can find a novel solution to replace the lost jobs. It was a body blow to lose 500 jobs and a company that had existed for 30 years. We need to do something to replace those jobs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been of assistance in the past and I know that he will continue to assist us. I assure him that I shall be knocking on his door.

Finally on the economy in the 21st century, one writer drew an analogy between "fleas and elephants". I was reminded of that comment a few weeks ago when I met Governor Gray Davies of California. He said that, in the first six months of this year, venture capital investment was $14 billion in California. Obviously, we could never get near that figure. In terms of that analogy, I think that we are a flea and it is important for the Scottish economy to get on the back of a good elephant. That is the way to prosper.

Inward investment is important—never let us forget it. In Scotland, we have 600 overseas companies prospering themselves and the population, of which 50 per cent. come from north America, 40 per cent. from Europe and 10 per cent. from the far east. We must maintain that focus while having a complementary approach of developing and enhancing small businesses at local level. That way, we shall sustain our future.

It is important to take the lessons of the report to heart and to start implementing them now. I look forward, with my colleagues and the Scottish Executive, to the implementation of those policies so that we have a more prosperous and, most importantly, socially inclusive Scotland in the 21st century.

6.4 pm

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) who has just delivered a speech which demonstrates why he was such a successful Minister at the Northern Ireland Office. I warmly compliment him on his term in office there, and wish him well in his work on behalf of his constituents in Dumbarton.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about after care for businesses, and that applies across the board. In too many cases, while there is almost an overdose of support for starting up businesses—which has its own problems—there is a poverty of support when it comes to after care. That is of fundamental importance to the issues with which we are wrestling.

I compliment the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) on the report of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, of which he is Chairman. It is a valuable report, assisted by the hon. Gentleman's experience of chairing other Select Committees. He brought to bear his considerable experience of transport issues in his contribution to the earlier debate. Perhaps I will leave that where it ended—in the debate.

The report is thoughtful and dispassionate. I could accuse the hon. Gentleman of being thoughtful in his contribution, but I could not accuse him of being dispassionate. He expressed his views, including his views about other parties, very firmly. I shall come on to some of those points in a moment.

The report makes many good, common-sense points, a number of which have been responded to positively by the Scottish Executive and the Secretary of State for Scotland. I specifically welcome what the Committee said about transport infrastructure. Considering the poverty of investment that our transport infrastructure has suffered in the past, and the dearth of investment in road and rail, it is no surprise that there is debate on both sides of the House about which project is the most important.

I welcome the Committee's comments on encouraging a movement up the value chain of successful investments and projects. The hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) made the serious point that some people are still trying to get near the value chain before they can move up it.

I also welcome the Committee's comments on the importance of measuring the success of assisted projects. All too often, debate is not enhanced by clear information about which projects have been successful and which have not. The hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) raised a number of points about the difficulties that require scrutiny and answers. I hope that the Scottish Parliament may be able to consider some of those points.

The hon. Member for Shettleston said that this was an unusual debate. It is unusual—it is a hybrid debate between one era and another. The Select Committee started its report pre-devolution and reported on the verge

[Mr. John Swinney]

of devolution taking legal effect. The Secretary of State's office and the Scottish Executive both responded to the report. Those two responses illustrate what has happened over the past few months. A vast number of areas of policy have passed from this House to the Scottish Parliament where they are being dealt with by Ministers.

I would like to make some additional comments about three areas of the report. The first is about the relationship between Scottish Trade International and Locate in Scotland. The Committee recommended that the Scottish Parliament should consider merging Locate in Scotland and the STI, and suggested that more resources were required for the work of Locate in Scotland in the United States.

I have always been concerned about the balance of resources allocated to inward investment and exporting. It has taken some time for the allocation of resources to export support to catch up with the support allocated to inward investment and exporting. The two are largely in the same ball park area within the Scottish budget. However, it is important that effective support is given to exporting, which has always struck me as the poor relation of that aspect of our approach to economic development. A huge challenge faces us on exporting. Too few of our companies do it. The report mentions that a substantial number of small and medium-sized enterprises export, but there are not enough of them.

Mr. Douglas Alexander (Paisley, South): Can the hon. Gentleman enlighten us on how a reduction from the significant diplomatic presence that the British state provides for Scottish exporters to the limited number of commercial embassies that the hon. Gentleman's party suggested at a previous Scottish election would in any way benefit those exporters?

Mr. Swinney: I wondered how long it would take before the first pathetic Labour intervention on my speech—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mrs. McKenna) will listen to what I have to say, I shall answer the points raised in the Select Committee's report. We are here to discuss that thoughtful report, which was agreed by all parties.

The report suggests a merger of Locate in Scotland and the STI. During the general election campaign, the Scottish National party argued for the closer integration of those two bodies and the Scottish tourist board. We argued for a single agency that would draw together all the external presence of those three bodies to ensure that we had a strong overseas presence to promote Scottish interests in exporting, inward investment and tourism.

Mr. Alexander: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Swinney: Will the hon. Gentleman let me finish making my point? The response of the Scottish Executive to the report makes it clear that they do not agree with the Select Committee's recommendation for merger, but it adds that there is room for greater co-operation and synergy between them. Surprise, surprise, the response continues to tell us that:

"In a pilot exercise in the United States, the operations of LiS, STI and other parts of Scottish Enterprise are being more closely integrated to pursue more effectively the full range of relevant economic development opportunities available."

That was the argument that my party pursued at the election. If the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) wants to hark back to the 1999 election campaign, he should hark back on the facts, not his invention.

Mr. Alexander: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Swinney: No, I have dealt with the hon. Gentleman's point and have nothing more to say on the matter. We need a realistic explanation of how the representation of Scotland can be advanced. It is a disgrace that Labour Members ridicule the arguments that we made at the election but now the Scottish Executive have submitted an endorsement of the SNP's policy at that election.

Mr. Alexander *rose—*

Mr. Swinney: The hon. Member for Paisley, South can keep bobbing up and down trying to make the same point, but I am going to move on.

The second point on which I wish to touch is concordats, to which the hon. Member for Shettleston and the report referred. I thought of intervening on the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) when he lambasted the concordats for failing to deliver harmony between the Scottish Executive and the United Kingdom Government. I restrained myself because I could not remember whether the Conservative group in the Scottish Parliament had voted to endorse the concordats. I am fairly sure that it did, but I did not want to intervene only to find that I had the facts wrong. I am certain, none the less, that the hon. Gentleman's point was absolutely futile.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that the concordats are not legally binding documents, but agreements between the Executive in Scotland and the Westminster Government. For a party in opposition—although not the hon. Gentleman's as he does not believe in the Union—an endorsement of the concordats is an endorsement of the best agreement that can be reached between the two Executives at any given moment. I do not see how the hon. Gentleman's criticism of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) can possibly be valid. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Swinney: If the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) would like to explain what all that meant, I shall happily take his intervention. I do not quite follow the argument of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve).

Paragraph C7 of the concordat on financial assistance to industry states:

"There will be mutual consultation, between the interested parties in each particular case, in adequate detail and to a reasonable timescale, before making offers (formal or indicative) of financial assistance to cases within the following categories".

I imagine that that is intended to cover the issues raised by the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale in relation to Viasystems. In that respect, it may be a fair point to argue.

My concern relates to evidence that was before the Select Committee. The hon. Members for North Wiltshire and for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale dealt with

competition between different parts of the United Kingdom—an inward investment project coming to Scotland, versus one that was going to the north of England, perhaps, or the midlands. Paragraph 110 of the Select Committee report, entitled "Learning from the competition", records the evidence of—I assume—Mrs. Ray Macfarlane, the managing director, operations, of Scottish Enterprise. The report notes:

"As previously stated, the Republic of Ireland has always been Scotland's 'arch enemy' in terms of inward investment. Mrs. Macfarlane hoped that as Scottish Enterprise went further down the line of looking for 'tailored' 'bespoke' projects which specifically suited the Scottish economy, the difficulty of putting 'clear, blue water' between the two would recede. This remains to be seen."

While Locate in Scotland and perhaps a regional development agency for a part of England are duly submitting their respective bids to the Joint Ministerial Committee for adjudication, and while the bids are being discussed in Committee, the global market is applying pressure to the inward investor for the contract. What we should fear is not other parts of the United Kingdom, but the global competition. The market is now a global market, and there is a danger that, while we are negotiating in Committee, the projects are haemorrhaging away to other parts of the European Union. That point remains unanswered, and I look forward to the answers at the end of the debate.

A related issue between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster is regional selective assistance. There is an inconsistency between the map being reserved, and responsibility for decisions about allocations resting with Holyrood. We shall no doubt return to the matter in due course.

The Select Committee recommends that Scottish Enterprise should provide a central service to advise indigenous firms seeking advice or assistance. The hon. Member for Maryhill referred to the report of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee of the Scottish Parliament, which reported yesterday. I had the privilege to be in the Chair of that Committee.

At the beginning of my speech, I probably should have declared an interest as a Member of the Scottish Parliament. I apologise for not doing so.

At the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, I was pleased that we secured unanimity among all four parties on a thorough and robust report based on evidence taken over recent months on the issue of access by businesses to business support and advice in Scotland. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Maryhill is not present. She spoke about the Glasgow economy and the difficulty that some organisations experience in accessing business help.

An enormous number of organisations in the market provide business support advice. The report of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee refers to the range of organisations that are active in the Glasgow market offering such support. I am told that, if one turned on Radio Clyde and listened to the advertisements at any time of the day, one could find the telephone numbers of numerous organisations to contact for advice about business start-up.

That diversity must be tackled. There are far too many providers of such services, often competing for the same clients, and in many cases using the same sources of public money to provide those services. The losers in the process are the people who need the support to assist their business development. I am pleased by the extent of agreement that has been reached among the participants from the four political parties in that Committee in the Scottish Parliament, and by the positive response to the report that was published yesterday by the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish).

What is important is that we spark a debate on how to deliver services to meet the demands of those who most wish to make a contribution to the developing Scottish economy. We have started that process and I look forward to further debate and discussion on the subject. Business support and economic development are fundamental to the health of the Scottish economy.

The Select Committee's report heartily advances and develops the debate on a number of key aspects and subjects. We need to sustain an active presence in the area of inward investment to guarantee our stake in the global inward investment market. We must ensure that Scottish companies can deliver a strong presence on export markets and broaden the number of companies involved in the process.

Most of all, we must have a cohesive and effective economic development strategy that delivers for the Scottish people and creates the right economic climate. Any climate that has interest rates at the height that they are now, with the damage that that causes to the Scottish business sector, is something on which the Government should reflect quickly.

6.21 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) and the Select Committee on their report. I am pleased that I am now a member of that Committee and I look forward to some enjoyable sessions.

Much of the report is relevant to my rural constituency in Dumfries and Galloway. Like the constituency of the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore), mine has seen many manufacturing job losses in the past couple of years. However, between 1987 and 1997, it also saw a loss of some 2,500 manufacturing jobs.

When a rural area such as ours depends heavily on major companies such as Du Pont, Nestlé and Elopak, it is only natural that, when they feel the pinch as a result of what is happening in other corners of the globe and have to make cuts, we feel it hard.

I am interested in the report's comments on clustering, which is important. Between 27 and 28 per cent. of Galloway is forested, so forestry is clearly one example of what we can do in our locality. In the past two years, the local enterprise company endeavoured to clear and prepare a site for an Austrian company. Some £3 million was invested in that, only for us to discover in February this year that the company no longer intended to come to the Lockerbie area.

However, I am pleased to say that another local firm has decided to take part of that site. I am looking forward to tomorrow when we are likely to hear of a £5 million investment on that site with the potential to create some 100 jobs during a three-year period. Initially, there will

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be forestry and sawmill work, which I gather will be developed into manufacturing. However, I will have more details about that tomorrow. I am delighted about that.

Let me dare to talk about the clustering of education. Dumfries is abuzz at the moment with the potential development of the Crichton site, providing campuses for Glasgow and Paisley universities and Dumfries and Galloway and Bell colleges. I look forward to the day when we can retain local young people by providing higher education opportunities on that site. We need to harness their academic ability and keep the locality vibrant.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston mentioned transport, and I note that the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) is in the Chamber. The A75 is not just any old road; it is an important avenue for economic development in our area. The alternative road that leads to a ferry port is the A55 in north Wales, which has received six times as much investment. It is not surprising that people in south-west Scotland feel somewhat disfranchised. If we are to move forward and have genuine inward investment, we must ensure that the infrastructure is right.

Inward investment does not offer all the answers because my constituency is rural and our challenge is to create an outward-looking and prosperous local economy. We want proper indigenous investment as well as a small amount of inward investment. We want to make that part of Scotland a model for rural development.

6.26 pm

Mrs. Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): I also welcome the Select Committee's report. I was briefly a Committee member but I left before the inquiry began. I shall be brief because many of my colleagues want to speak and there is not much time.

I am keen to take part in the debate because I was a member of Scottish Enterprise from 1994 to 1997. I was involved in the discussions that led to its creation. Locate in Scotland is part of Scottish Enterprise. It is an important organisation, which has grown from strength to strength. I point out to the hon. Members for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) that we are successful in attracting inward investment not only because of Locate in Scotland but because Scotland is very good at partnership working—that is demonstrated by the fact that we set up Locate in Scotland. The support of embassies throughout the world is crucial to attracting inward investment to Scotland. The increase in inward investment in the years to which the hon. Member for North Wiltshire referred was due to the creation of the single market and the work of Locate in Scotland. It is important to put that on record. Since 1997, there has been a substantial increase in inward investment of £2 billion, which has created 30,000 jobs in Scotland. The matter is complex.

I shall briefly consider the summary of the report's conclusions. Transport is vital. Anyone who is familiar with the route from Glasgow to the north of Scotland knows that the A80 through Cumbernauld is the biggest bottleneck in Scotland. Sorting that out is crucial to the development of good infrastructure. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) that we need the M74, but I believe that we need the M80 far more.

I do not understand the reason for the lack of investment in public transport between areas where there are jobs and areas of high unemployment, such as the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston. The transport links between those areas are poor, and we should examine that. More funds should be made available, but we must be careful because funds are also important to encouraging and developing indigenous industries. I would be more circumspect, and not simply demand more money for Locate in Scotland. The matter is more complex than that.

We want to be involved in the debate about the future of Locate in Scotland and Scottish Trade International. That leads us to the future of Scottish Enterprise. The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning in the Scottish Parliament—my hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish)—has begun that important debate, which must be reasoned and based on knowledge and information.

Scottish Enterprise is a dynamic organisation that is always ready to move forward, as its chairman, Sir Ian Wood, showed when he gave evidence to the Committee; he agrees with the recommendation to link Locate in Scotland and the STI, although a lot of other issues have to be looked at. We have to move forward continually and my constituency of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth has been successful in attracting inward investment. Significant companies—from not only Japan, but Germany, France, Korea and the United States of America—have located there and recently a successful investment was made in a call centre by Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, creating sound financial sector jobs. That is a good example of how we can move forward.

Our jobcentre staff have shown tremendous commitment. They embraced the new deal from the beginning and took it forward, so much so that we have reduced youth unemployment in my constituency by 72 per cent. The overall reduction is 40 per cent., and we have to take that example to the rest of Scotland and use the information that it provides to take us forward. I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) and for Shettleston: we need to use the skill and knowledge that has developed in successful areas to help the areas of Scotland where there is deep poverty. That is how to tackle social exclusion.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) said, we must recognise that the world economy is changing. For example, in the words of Alf Young in the 10 December edition of *The Herald*,

"the new economy based on new technologies and high-value services traded on the Internet, is coming at us like a Caribbean typhoon."

We have to accommodate all those changes and I believe that Scottish Enterprise has the will to take us forward. It is the right organisation to do so and will be very much involved in the debate, which is about what is best for the people of Scotland and sharing information in Scotland and in the rest of the United Kingdom. We should not follow a hysterical nationalist agenda.

6.32 pm

Mr. Douglas Alexander (Paisley, South): With some trepidation, I rise to speak: I am not a member the august Scottish Affairs Committee, but I have been emboldened by the characteristically generous remarks of the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), who is unfortunately not in his place, because I know that he has done a great deal of work on the Committee's report. I agree with its authors that this is a timely point at which to consider the whole issue of inward investment, given that it was prepared at such a critical juncture for our constitutional future.

The challenge for Members in all parts of the House at this point is to ensure that the new constitutional architecture is able to work to the advantage of the Scottish economy as a whole by successfully securing continued inward investment. I want to give the House a sense of the significance of inward investment to my constituency of Paisley, South: it is central to the Renfrewshire economy, of which my constituency is a part. From a Renfrewshire work force of 121,000, inward investors employ upwards of 13,000 people and 50 per cent. of all manufacturing jobs in Renfrewshire come from inward investors. I am proud to note that four significant inward investments have been made in Renfrewshire over the past few months, creating more than 1,000 new jobs.

Over recent years, Renfrewshire has attracted a range of major direct foreign investment, first in electronics and now in the developing call centre and internet sectors, which were discussed by my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall). They contribute to Renfrewshire's £5.4 billion of exports, which in turn make up more than 30 per cent. of Scotland's total manufactured exports. The importance of inward investment in not unique to the Renfrewshire economy. As the authors of the Select Committee report confirmed, inward investment is absolutely crucial to the manufacturing base of modern Scotland. The massive job losses suffered in manufacturing areas such as west central Scotland—of which Paisley, South is part—resulted in large measure from the two recessions in as many decades created by the previous Conservative Government. They have increased Scotland's reliance on inward investment over the past two decades.

As the report makes clear, the importance of foreign direct investment in the Scottish economy can hardly be overstated. There are now nearly 600 overseas-owned concerns in Scotland, providing some 80,000 jobs. Scottish Office evidence given to the Select Committee showed that emphasis was placed on the role of inward investment in helping to restructure Scotland's economy in the context of new, lighter manufacturing activities based on modern technology and scientific developments. For more than 20 years, the electronics industry—Compaq and IBM are close to my constituency—has been the single most important industrial sector for manufacturing inward investment in Scotland.

The keys to our success in Scotland, in terms of electronics inward investment, are now well established. The rapid growth of the market for electronic products, allied to the presence of a critical mass of related electronics companies in west central Scotland—and, indeed, in parts of Fife—combined with high-skill labour markets, have produced attractive locations for inward investment by electronics firms.

In the face of evidence of the strength of our electronics sector, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that foreign investment now transcends electronics, and extends to a number of parts of the Scottish economy. Foreign companies are investing in sectors as diverse as food and drink, chemicals and petroleum products. As with the rest of the economy, the case for the centrality of inward investment in the Scottish economy is comprehensively made by the report.

One of the merits of the report is the effectiveness with which it counters the idea advanced by critics of inward investment that a crude choice can be made between an economy that supports inward investment, and an economy that encourages the growth of indigenous enterprises. That was brought home to me by evidence presented to the Committee by Renfrewshire council, which said that inward investors in my area were playing a key role as suppliers to incoming investors. I feel that such a relationship can be mutually beneficial, and can benefit every part of the economy.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): The hon. Gentleman lauds the benefits of inward investment, and I endorse that. We have heard a good deal about the 30,000 jobs created by it, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for telling us how many jobs have been created in his constituency. Can he explain why those jobs, and that inward investment, have not got to Maryhill or Argyll?

Mr. Alexander: I will answer that by echoing what has been said by others. We must recognise that, despite regional selective assistance and the efforts made by organisations such as Locate in Scotland, at a certain level, inward investment decisions are essentially commercial decisions, determined by the management of private companies. This is radically different from the regional assistance that was offered in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, I believe that inward investment makes a significant contribution. If the hon. Lady visited Compaq in Renfrewshire and saw the travel-to-work area there, the crude myth that, if a factory is located in a certain place, that is the only part of Scotland that benefits would probably be exploded.

I feel that the central challenge presented by the report is this: how, with the new constitutional architecture, can not just the Westminster Parliament but the Parliament in Holyrood best improve on the success of inward investment that has already been achieved? I think that two key drivers dictate that success, not just in Scotland but throughout the United Kingdom. One is economic stability, and the other is political stability. The Government have a proud record of achieving economic stability in their first two years in office: inflation is on target, public borrowing is under control, and unemployment is falling again. I was thankful to see the figures for Scotland yesterday.

In such a transient international marketplace, the case for economic stability almost goes without saying, but I also want to emphasise the significance of political stability. If we were to compromise economic stability with constitutional instability of the type offered by the

[Mr. Alexander]

Opposition. I fear that a heavy price would be paid, not only by employees but by companies throughout Scotland.

Mr. Swinney: Which party does the hon. Gentleman mean?

Mr. Alexander: I mean either a party that sought to renegotiate the terms of the treaty of Rome, or a party that sought to renegotiate the terms of the Act of Union. Both pose a significant and profound threat to the people of Scotland.

In recent elections that the hon. Member for North Tayside is keen not to discuss, we defeated the party that stood for the status quo. I feel that the threat posed to inward investment by a party of separation is profound and real. It is only by an effective and dynamic partnership of both Parliaments that we can move forward. I commend that approach to the House.

6.40 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): It has been a pleasure to listen to the debate. I apologise if my remarks are brief. It seems to me and, I dare say, to the Secretary of State, that greater benefit is to be derived from listening than from standing up and pontificating. The interesting speech of the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) reinforced my view that it was worth waiting for.

The report is interesting. Some of the areas of interest lie not in the recommendations, but, as often happens in such reports, in reading the body of the text. There are occasions when Select Committees make many pithy comments, but do not wish to embarrass the Government too much, so they do not embody the comments in recommendations and call for a response.

I was somewhat sorry to see how brief the response from the Westminster Government was on some of the issues. It was confined to the narrow recommendation on transport and wholly avoided some of the comments, particularly those in paragraph 58 concerning taxation.

Several issues in the report need to be looked: taxation, transport infrastructure, on which we have important responsibilities, and the whole area of concordats, on which I do not wish to dwell at too much length this evening, although I will make one or two comments in view of the remarks by the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney).

The Conservative party—I make it clear to the Secretary of State because, sometimes, it does not yet seem to have got into his head or those of other Labour Members—wants the devolved structure to work. We want the concordats to work. We want Scotland to prosper under devolution. Therefore, the remarks that I shall make are all designed to ensure that that comes about.

We are concerned that, in relation to taxation, the Committee seems to be letting the Government off the hook in its report. Scotland's problems are not unique. The point is made in the report that Scotland is a peripheral area within the European Union. For that matter, the United Kingdom is a peripheral area within the European Union, except possibly for some small slither of the south-east. Therefore, if we want the country to prosper, we will have to make it uniquely attractive for inward investment and to ensure that companies wish to locate here because of the advantages that we can offer.

Over the past few years, the evidence has been overwhelming: we have been able to do that largely because of an extremely good tax regime. The City of London provides a unique financial sector, which—I say to the hon. Member for North Tayside—is of inestimable benefit to Scotland, as it is to England. Companies wish to locate because there is a stable financial framework.

Attracting inward investment is a challenge. The Government cannot escape the taxation issues that are raised in the report. Paragraph 58 spells it out clearly. It goes into the whole issue of how the Republic of Ireland, for example, has succeeded in making itself attractive to inward investment by lowering corporation tax to derisory levels. It also goes into the way in which other countries such as the Netherlands have facilitated inward investment.

The Government's record on the matter is extremely poor. The rise in overall taxation has taken place under the present Government. It has been commented on again and again, and it is directly affecting business.

Early in the debate, we looked at the some of the statistical evidence. I regret one part of the contribution of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall). There is a Kafkaesque delusion about what happened during the 18 years of so-called Conservative misrule. The statistics from Locate in Scotland—

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Grieve: No. I do not have enough time. I apologise, but I simply do not. I know that the Secretary of State and the hon. Lady will understand that.

The evidence from Locate in Scotland's own statistics is that the surge in investment in the early 1990s was massive and simply cannot be wished away. Moreover, it undoubtedly continued in the first two years of the Government. There is also some evidence that it has diminished. It was suggested in the debate that the south-east Asia crisis is one reason for that decline. Although I do not disagree with that, it is also worth considering whether the fiscal climate that we are creating is attractive to business. Opposition Members question very much whether it is.

The point was made very forcefully by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) that the situation on fuel taxation and the fuel escalator has been getting completely out of hand. I am perfectly prepared to accept what the Secretary of State has to say: environmental reasons, among others, made the fuel escalator seem attractive—a point that has been reinforced by Ministers time and again to the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member. However, the evidence has been overwhelming that the escalator has not been producing the desired results, and that it has been having a highly negative effect on business, particularly business located in remote rural areas. Therefore, it should be a particular concern when we consider the economy in Scotland.

The best way of achieving inward investment is not by all sorts of magical wand-waving and quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations. Although those may be

able to help, ultimately, if the fiscal and financial climate is not good for inward investment, it will not happen. If the climate is good, inward investment will pour in to most areas, apart from the most deprived.

I tell the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) that I understand the force of the points that she made. I know her constituency a little, and appreciate that it has been wholly bypassed by the benefits that have come to many other parts of the United Kingdom. That problem undoubtedly needs to be dealt with.

The report contains an excellent section on a changing world, and paragraphs 19 to 21 go into great detail about the complete change in the world economic climate. One of the points that was made is that it is simply not possible to continue examining economic issues in an old-fashioned way—although, after listening to one or two speeches in this debate, it seems that we are still using blinkered vision that deals far more with the 1960s than with current-day problems.

The old dividing lines are undoubtedly now blurred, and Scotland—just as much as the rest of the United Kingdom—has to live in a different world. That is why I return to the point on tax that I made to the Secretary of State. If indeed we are over-regulating and putting £30 billion of extra burdens on United Kingdom industry and business, it is not surprising that the inward investment level may be slackening. One does not have to go to south-east Asia to discover the causes of that.

I shall now deal—I am sorry to have to do it so briefly; I should have liked to go into it in greater detail—with the general matter of the concordats. I tell the hon. Member for North Tayside that the question on the concordats is not whether they are the best thing on offer, but whether, in view of the voluntary nature of the concordats—they cannot be sold as anything else—their best chance of long-term success, facilitating inward investment and not being messed around by the hon. Member for North Tayside and his colleagues, should they ever have the opportunity, is in rapidly establishing them as constitutional convention. The concordats undoubtedly seem to be fairly well drafted, although it is a great pity that we did not have a chance to see them earlier.

If the concordats are established as convention, there will be a framework in which we are able to operate, and a framework in which a future Conservative Government may well find relations easy with a Scottish Executive who are not necessarily of the same political complexion. The Secretary of State, as a Unionist, should be wishing for such a framework. In those circumstances, therefore, it is a legitimate matter for us to wish to consider.

We are also bound to express anxieties that there remains an enormous lack of clarity about how the relations work in practice. Picking simply one point—which is slightly peripheral to the issue—as an example, it is slightly unclear whether the Secretary of State for Scotland was ever informed by the Prime Minister that an offer on beef had been made by the French Prime Minister. Although the Secretary of State would have been right to turn down the offer, I do not know whether he was told of it. If that is the level of co-operation, there is legitimate cause for anxiety.

It is time for me to bring my remarks to a close. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Another time, I shall be far less liberal in giving way to Labour Members and allowing them more time to speak.

I reserve my final remarks for the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore), who said that education needed to continue north of the border. I heartily agree. I have visited businesses elsewhere and, if he would like to recommend some in his constituency for me to visit, I should be only too happy to take up his offer.

I very much hope that devolution continues to succeed, but it will require scrutiny and, above all, a proper fiscal climate for inward investment.

6.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): Because of the time constraints and the fact that some speeches have been cut short to allow time for others to contribute, I shall not take interventions. I apologise in advance for that and for the fact that I may not cover everyone.

I am tempted to respond immediately to the point on beef. I should like to correct the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) on the facts of the case, as I have had to correct his colleagues. No formal offer was made during tripartite discussions. The idea of a herd-based scheme was discussed at the margins with a number of people, including the Scottish Executive's Minister for Rural Affairs, who was aware that the issue was coming up. Had it been put into effect, it would have had no implications in Scotland, because it would have meant abandoning the law and science and everybody in Europe who was supporting us on the date-based scheme and changing to a narrow certified scheme that could have applied only in Northern Ireland. Had it applied to Scotland with a narrow definition of grass-fed cattle, it could have applied to less than 1 per cent. of Scottish cattle. That is why I am so disgusted that the only allies that the French seem to have in Europe on the issue are the Scottish nationalists. I would have been insulted if the Prime Minister had even considered making any formal approaches to any of us to abandon our correct position.

Now that I have put that right, I shall turn to the report, on which I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall). A tremendous amount of work went into it and he was central in steering it through the Committee. Inward investment and good export performance are important issues. They are both essential to the health of the Scottish economy, although we should never forget how dependent we are on the indigenous growth of our own industries, small and large.

The debate is a useful opportunity to set out the basis of the Government's view. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) had it in one. In this post-devolution era, the people of Scotland are interested in successful output and delivery—not endless discussion on the process of devolution, but how it makes day-to-day life better. Central to that is the concept of partnership. The policies of the Government here on fiscal and economic matters, international relations and the key elements of economic infrastructure, such as energy supply, telecommunications and transport links, are crucial to providing the right climate for business investment and success. We need to work in partnership with the Scottish Executive, who are responsible for promoting economic development and trade and providing assistance to business and industry. Both bodies need to work in partnership with the agencies involved in encouraging inward investment and the export trade.

[Dr. John Reid]

The results of that partnership approach have been impressive and we abandon it at our peril. That is where my party, both in the Scottish Executive and in the Westminster Government, parts company with the Scottish National party. The illusion that, in place of that partnership, we can throw a ring fence around our economy, that a fortress Scotland policy will protect us from the real world, that conflict instead of co-operation will provide cohesion and that grudge and grievance are an adequate analysis of the world economy—

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: Wrong.

Dr. Reid: Absolutely. That analysis is wrong on every count, but they are all the policies of the Scottish National party. The idea that continual constitutional instability will be the basis for economic stability is a cruel illusion that will not be bought by the people of Scotland.

Mr. Swinney: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr. Reid: I am sorry, but I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He understands why. He is being selective in his interventions. I notice that he was wise enough not to involve himself in the compact disc recorded by some of his colleagues. Presumably, either he chose not to take part, or he was disqualified on the basis that he could sing.

Since we were elected in May 1997, the Government's sound management of public finances and our fiscal and economic policies have produced the very conditions of economic stability that the hon. Member for Beaconsfield described as essential. From May 1997 to date, inward investment in Scotland has amounted to more than £2 billion and an estimated 30,000 jobs. By any standards, that is an impressive performance.

Figures published by the Invest in Britain Bureau show that, although it accounts for less than 9 per cent. of the UK population, Scotland has consistently over the past few years secured between 12 and 20 per cent. of all inward investment projects attracted to the UK, and between 17 and 25 per cent. of the new jobs associated with such projects.

In the five years to March 1999, Locate in Scotland recorded 436 inward investment projects, involving planned investment of no less than £7 billion associated with the expected creation or safeguarding of nearly 68,000 jobs. That is the record of success of the co-operation that would be put in peril by the continual instability that the Scottish National party represents as the way forward.

In 1998-99, Locate in Scotland and its partners helped to attract to Scotland a total of 9,041 planned new jobs. So far this financial year, 1999-2000, inward investors have already—in only nine months—announced plans to create a total of 8,849 new jobs in Scotland. So Locate in Scotland, far from declining—as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) suggested—is well on its way to beating its performance last year.

It is not just the statistics that are encouraging. The range of companies and their activities demonstrate a robust portfolio. Project sizes have ranged from 25 to 1,500 jobs in both the central belt and in rural areas.

Of course, it is not all one way. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) mentioned how some areas have missed out, and I am the first to accept that. That is why the measures brought in by this Government on child benefit, the working families tax credit and the new deal are so important, as is the work carried out by the Scottish Executive on social exclusion and poverty.

The hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) mentioned a case from his area. I accept that companies will sometimes relocate—they have done from my constituency, including Cummings and Caterpillar. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that companies are closely monitored. If they go elsewhere in the UK, they are monitored by the DTI to ensure that the money provided by this Government is not used merely to assist the geographical movement of similar jobs.

We have had a short but significant debate. I pay tribute to the work force in Scotland who, along with our infrastructure, education system and environment, are one of our greatest means of attracting people to Scotland.

We now move to another stage of the devolution settlement—not only the concordats, but the joint action committees. We have established co-operation and partnership in practice, and we are aiming to deliver. We now move from the joint action committee on poverty to that on the knowledge economy. That subject is vital, as is the fact that we are working in partnership. That partnership approach will ultimately be backed by, and to the benefit of, the people of Scotland.

It being Seven o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the deferred Questions which he was directed by paragraphs (4) and (5) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates) to put at that hour.*

ESTIMATES, 1999-2000

Class III, Vote 6

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £511,039,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2001 for expenditure by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on support to nationalised industries; grants to Railtrack, British Rail, London Transport, Docklands Light Railway, DoA Ltd; MRPS grant; payments in respect of expenditure relating to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link; expenditure connected with the privatisation of British Rail Business; other consultancies; expenditure relating to Commission for Integrated Transport; capital expenditure by transport industries funded by EC grants; railway industry and National Freight Company pensions funds; National Freight Company travel concessions; rebate of fuel duty to bus operators; ports and shipping services; Royal Travel; miscellaneous services; civil aviation services; international aviation services; transport security; freight grants, and expenditure associated with the non rail privatisation programme.

Class XIII, Vote 1

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £5,810,419,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2001 for expenditure by the Scotland Office on administrative costs

and operational costs; electoral publicity; the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Scotland; other devolution costs, including the panel to oversee the cross-party electoral expenditure agreement and on a grant to the Scottish Consolidated Fund.

It being after Seven o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the Questions which he was directed by paragraphs (1) and (2) of Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates etc.) to put at that hour.*

ESTIMATES, 1999–2000 (ARMY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 2000 an additional number not exceeding 10,620 all ranks be maintained for Service in the Reserve Land Forces.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES, 1999–2000

Resolved,

That a supplementary sum, not exceeding £3,773,575,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to defray the charges for civil services which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31st March 2000, as set out in HC 4 of Session 1999–2000.

ESTIMATES, 2000–01 (VOTE ON ACCOUNT)

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £101,653,019,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charges for civil and defence services in Classes I and II; Class III Votes 1 to 5 and Votes 7 to 12; Classes IV to XII; Classes XIV to XVIII; and Classes XVIII, A and XVIII, B for the year ending on 31st March 2001, as set out in HC 5, 6 and 7 of Session 1999–2000.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in on the foregoing resolutions: And that the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Andrew Smith, Dawn Primarolo, Miss Melanie Johnson and Mr. Stephen Timms do prepare and bring it in.

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Mr. Stephen Timms accordingly presented a Bill to apply certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund to the service of the years ending on 31 March 2000 and 2001: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time this day, and to be printed [Bill 32].

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Question, That the Bill be now read a Second time, *put forthwith, pursuant to Order [14 December] and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills), and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question, That the Bill be now read the Third time, *put and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LEGAL AID AND ADVICE

That the draft Legal Advice and Assistance (Scope) (Amendment) Regulations 1999, which were laid before this House on 1st December, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

Dangerous Driving (Sentences)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

7.2 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I am pleased to have secured this debate. The case that I am about to recount was instigated by the poignant and completely unnecessary death of a young police officer in my constituency in April, but the injustice that it represents will be familiar to many hon. Members in constituencies throughout the country.

Last year, I secured an Adjournment debate on death on the roads in my constituency, but that concerned accidents on a dangerous stretch of the A27 between Lancing and Worthing, whereas what occurred last April was entirely avoidable: the tragic death of a police officer at the hands of a convicted felon, driving recklessly and dangerously.

Just before midnight on the evening of Saturday 24 April, PC Jeff Tooley, aged 26, a police officer based at Shoreham and living in my constituency, was carrying out his duty perfectly properly, manning a speed check on the Brighton road. He was wearing a highly visible fluorescent uniform and holding a torch. In no way could he be described as the author of his own misfortune. He moved out to stop a white Renault van clocked at 51 mph in a 30 mph zone; but the van did not stop or decrease its speed. Subsequently, it hit him, lifting him off the ground and depositing his body about 70 ft further along the road, before speeding off.

It was claimed that the 48-year-old driver of the van, from Brighton, had been drinking and fell asleep at the wheel, but subsequently the van was found burned out in nearby Hove: hardly the act of a driver suffering from tiredness and drunkenness. Some 12 hours after the incident, PC Jeff Tooley succumbed to his injuries and died in Worthing hospital. I am grateful for the comments of the Minister at the time, who paid tribute to PC Tooley when I raised the case on the Monday immediately after that tragic event.

The case gained a high profile because the victim was a police officer doing his duty. However, the circumstances and subsequent judicial procedures should be viewed no less seriously than if it had been a pedestrian hit by the van while crossing the road on his or her way home.

PC Tooley is said to be the first serving police officer in the Sussex constabulary to have lost his life in the line of duty. His family and his colleagues at Shoreham police station and throughout the Sussex force were understandably devastated. At a packed funeral in Chichester cathedral, which I attended, seasoned and long-serving police officers, including the chief constable himself were reduced to tears. Jeff Tooley was greatly liked in his force. He was described as an experienced, committed and highly motivated officer. He had held a burning ambition to become a police officer and joined the force in 1990. He had an exemplary record and a promising career ahead of him. At his funeral, an epitaph to Constable CT483 read simply,

"When one of us falls, the rest of us stumble."

The waste of such a promising young life, with so much to live for, was distressing enough, but the grief felt by family and friends has been compounded by the subsequent shortcomings of the justice system in dealing with the driver who caused PC Tooley's death. His family were also especially distressed that his organs could not be used to save the life of another, because the guilty party fled the scene of the crime and PC Tooley's body had to be made available for legal reasons.

Three days after Jeff Tooley's death, the killer turned himself in, although by that stage the police were well aware of his identity. At the subsequent hearing, he denied causing death by dangerous driving and performing an act intended to pervert the course of justice—setting fire to the van—and pleaded not guilty. However, on 11 November before the case came to court, the killer changed his plea to guilty. Subsequently, he was sentenced to seven years imprisonment.

The maximum penalty available to the sentencing judge was just 10 years, and he was obliged to reduce that because of the 11th-hour change of plea to guilty. Indeed, up to 1993, the maximum penalty was just five years. After time spent on remand is taken into account, the killer will be eligible for parole in just three years. That is despite the fact that he has a long criminal record, stretching back to 1966, including a seven-year prison sentence in the 1970s for attempted robbery and eight years in the 1980s for robbery.

The comments of the sentencing judge struck a chord with many people who followed the case. Judge Anthony Thorpe at Chichester crown court said:

"Parliament has decided that the maximum penalty for death by dangerous driving is 10 years, whereas the maximum penalty for burglary is 14 years . . . that might strike the public as an odd approach to the value placed on human life."

I agree, as do the many hon. Members—of all parties, and from Sussex and the rest of the country—who have signed my early-day motion on the subject.

If that criminal had stolen PC Tooley's car that night, or broken into his home but left him unscathed, he would have faced a sentence of up to 14 years' imprisonment, instead of a maximum of 10. Patently, there is a grave inconsistency in our legal system's treatment of dangerous driving offences. It is increasingly perceived to be unfair and to undermine the seriousness with which that crime is taken and prosecuted. This case has shown that clearly and that is why we believe that the courts should have available the possibility of imposing a life sentence on the worst cases of death by dangerous driving. This case would appear to qualify as just such a one.

My view is born not out of some knee-jerk wish to seek revenge but out of a desire to ensure that dangerous driving is taken far more seriously as the life-threatening act that it can be, and to ensure that the severity of the penalties available act as a real deterrent and highlight the unacceptability of dangerous driving which, in the extreme, can lead to an innocent person's death. The killer may well not have set out to cause the death of a policeman on that night but, despite the lack of obvious intent, someone who spends an evening drinking heavily in a pub and then speeds home on a dangerous stretch of road at 51 mph should be no less responsible for his actions and the result of his recklessness than if he had set out to cause the death with intent. A motor vehicle in irresponsible hands is a lethal weapon—no less potent than a gun or a knife. In this day and age, citizens who qualify to drive and exercise that right should be fully responsible for the effects of exercising that right.

Let us consider the statistics. Between 1993 and 1996, the average penalty for death by dangerous driving was just 33.7 months. That compares, over the same period, with the average penalty for manslaughter of 62 months. Between 1993 and 1996, there were 1,989 convictions for the charge of death by dangerous driving, but only 47 of those cases were given terms of imprisonment of five years or more. In fact, the terms had been rising, but fell back in 1996.

More recently in 1997, 205 people were convicted of causing death by dangerous driving, but the average sentence for the 125 of them convicted in Crown courts was again just 33 months.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: May I proceed and perhaps give way later?

At a time when road traffic deaths are falling, the number of successful prosecutions for death by dangerous driving seems to be falling disproportionately faster, and the subsequent sentences remain stubbornly unconvincing. It is clear that, because it is often difficult to get a charge of death by dangerous driving to stick, the charge often drops to the lesser crime of careless driving. That may have been the point that the hon. Gentleman was about to make. Careless driving is the more usual offence brought after a road death and it relates only to the standard of driving and excludes the death.

I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) who highlighted the gap in the law and expressed the need for an intermediate offence between death by dangerous driving and driving without due care and attention. I was happy to support the campaign that she launched, together with her local newspaper the Peterborough *Evening Telegraph*, earlier in the year. I thank the road traffic victim charity, RoadPeace, for the information that it has provided. It says:

"The principle that a driver is not responsible for the consequences of his actions is contrary to the public interests—it must have an effect on driver behaviour."

Some experts say that the current penalty system for death by dangerous driving militates against the crime being properly investigated with the necessary resources. Nicholas Atkinson QC believes that too many cases involving causing death on the roads are not properly investigated and often end up being charged as driving without due care and attention. Increasing the maximum available sentence could mean that greater attention would be paid to the investigation, the prosecution and the sentencing of offenders involved in death crashes.

The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, in a long report published in July which I commend and which was entitled "Road Traffic Law and Enforcement", agrees with that view. It claims:

"Bad driving offences, especially those involving death, are often not being dealt with in a manner which signals to society that such offences are a serious matter."

It must be right that the appropriate charge should be one that makes the death and culpability for the death the issue, rather than determining a standard of driving. In many cases, the circumstances of the incident include matters such as leaving the scene of the crime, as happened in the case of PC Tooley, that do not relate to the standard of driving.

Making a life sentence award available to a judge, purely at his or her discretion, for the very worst cases would not tie his or her hands but rather enable the courts to recognise the real seriousness of the crime of causing death by dangerous driving because, as the Jeff Tooley case so vividly illustrates, low sentences are a symptom of the low priority given to death and injury on our roads, not the totality of the problem.

In the United States, for example, and in many European Union countries, a charge of homicide would result, and it is time that we empowered the courts to send out a clear signal in this country that there will be zero tolerance of such behaviour and that responsible, law-abiding citizens have a right to protection from those who persist in flouting the law in such an extreme manner.

The Jeff Tooley case has struck a particularly strong chord with many people in Sussex. I am grateful to the local media, particularly the Brighton *Evening Argus*, for giving the case such a high profile. The *Argus* launched its "Justice for Jeff" campaign last month in horror at the apparent injustice meted out to the seasoned criminal who killed him. Like me, the local media want life sentences available for the worst cases of causing death by dangerous driving.

Such a change in the law will not, alas, bring back my constituent or the many hundreds of others killed in appalling circumstances while lawfully going about their business or performing their jobs. Some of the worst cases involve children who come into contact with dangerous drivers while crossing the road on the presumed safety of a pedestrian crossing.

However, a change in the law might just act as a deterrent. Making dangerous drivers think twice about the consequences of their irresponsible behaviour might prevent more such tragic waste of promising young lives. I hope that the Minister will agree to meet a delegation made up of my constituents, families of victims, road safety groups and the police—all of whom support the change in the law that I have set out.

If the Government take this anomaly in the law seriously, and if we make progress towards achieving the change that I have described, my constituents at least will be able to say that justice for Jeff has been achieved in part, and that something positive will have come from his senseless and tragic death.

7.16 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I cannot call the hon. Lady unless I have had notice that both the hon. Member who has secured the Adjournment debate and the Minister agree to her participation. It is a courtesy to let such participation be known to the Chair beforehand, but, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and the Minister are both signifying that they agree to her making a contribution, I call the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton).

Mrs. Brinton: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for being remiss in not contacting you on this matter,

[Mrs. Brinton]

although I have been in touch with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and my hon. Friend the Minister.

I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham on securing a debate on this important subject, and on the way in which he has pressed his case tonight. I fully support his contention that the penalty for causing death by dangerous driving is inconsistent with the penalties for other crimes, such as those that he has described eloquently to the House this evening.

I know that the hon. Gentleman is aware of, and has supported, the campaign being run by the Peterborough *Evening Telegraph* in my constituency to change the law in a subtly different way. I am also aware of, and support, the excellent campaign "Justice for Jeff" that he is spearheading, along with the Brighton *Evening Argus*, which deals with dangerous driving matters. The hon. Gentleman provided very able support earlier this year to the campaign in Peterborough, which aims to increase the maximum penalty available in such cases, and to make the whole range of penalties fit the crime.

The *Evening Telegraph* began its campaign to bring justice to the families of victims such as Glenn Jones, a 24-year-old Peterborough man killed on the road. The driver's cursory and trivial punishment was a fine of £250 and nine penalty points on his licence. What price human life unless we change the law?

The hon. Gentleman is at the forefront of all campaigns to make our roads safer. I hope that the debate this evening and the additional matters that I have raised briefly will find a resonance with my hon. Friend the Minister.

7.18 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on the very effective and powerful way in which he put his case, for which I have immense sympathy. I assure him that I should be more than happy to receive a delegation, led by him, of those involved in the "Justice for Jeff" campaign.

Since I have been a Minister, I have received a delegation led by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton). I have also met a number of the various other organisations campaigning for change in this area. The House may be interested to know that this is not a matter raised by only a few isolated hon. Members: more than 20 hon. Members have written to Home Office Ministers over the past year or so about similar cases in their constituencies. Concern over the matter is widespread, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise it in this debate. He made a powerful speech.

I should like to take this opportunity to express the condolences of the whole House to the family and friends of Jeff Tooley, whose life was lost in such a terrible way. The fact that he was a policeman means that the force of the tragedy is that much greater for me, given my responsibilities for the police. However, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, many people lose their lives in that tragic and appalling manner.

The criminal law can contribute to a response to this terrible state of affairs. I welcome the opportunity to debate the subject this evening. No one can dispute the seriousness of the consequences when death is the result of a crash on the roads. Criminal law must address the extent of the offender's culpability. The Government have the duty to make available to the Crown Prosecution Service, the police and the courts offences appropriate to the degree of culpability of the driver in the circumstances in question. As the hon. Gentleman said, in some cases there is a difficulty that, in law, the offender has been defined as acting carelessly rather than intentionally, but the consequences of his act are disproportionately serious. That has given rise to the concerns raised in today's debate. It is especially likely that families will feel aggrieved at the outcome of such a case.

It is worth setting out the current framework of the law. The North committee looked at all these matters and reported on this issue in 1988. It addressed concerns that the law relating to road traffic accidents had not developed satisfactorily. The committee gave detailed consideration, among a wide range of other things, to the possibility of creating a new offence of causing death by careless driving, but concluded that it would be wrong to visit on a driver severe penalties for unforeseen tragic consequences if his or her actions were careless.

During the past 10 years or so, that view has been accepted by Governments. Where the driving which resulted in death is thought to be only careless, there is no causing death offence, unless the offender was driving while under the influence of drink or drugs. By 1991, a consensus had emerged that the consumption of drink or drugs before driving carelessly was an aggravating factor which justified treating this behaviour more severely if a death were to result. The Government are actively reviewing the question of whether a new offence of causing death by careless driving should be introduced. The arguments are powerful and need to be reconsidered in the light of the whole debate that has taken place.

Mr. Miller: I have been following the debate with great interest in view of my role in RoadPeace. Will my hon. Friend re-examine the March 1996 Law Commission report on involuntary manslaughter? It may provide the answer to some of the searching questions asked by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton).

Mr. Clarke: I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he and RoadPeace have been doing to raise these issues. He makes a serious suggestion which needs active consideration.

Within the current framework of law, the CPS role is to decide how to view the case. To do this, it must look at the evidence and decide whether sufficient evidence to establish guilt of a particular offence exists. It is a matter for the CPS, which is independent of government, and it is not appropriate for me or any Minister to comment on or interfere in the decisions on the charges to bring in a particular case.

The Attorney-General is involved if there is unduly lenient sentencing which could undermine public confidence in the criminal justice system. Courts do not always make full use of their powers. The Attorney-General has powers to refer cases of indictable offences, including causing death by dangerous driving, to the Court of Appeal where it appears that the sentence was unduly lenient. The Court of Appeal then has power

to increase the sentence. That must be done within 28 days of the last sentence in the case being passed. The Court of Appeal can impose a higher sentence only if it finds that the sentence was unduly lenient.

I now come to sentencing guidelines. Obviously, there is a wide range of practice across the country on these matters. The Government are keen to promote consistency in sentencing. It is only right that offenders should be treated equitably and that inappropriate regional variations in sentencing should be avoided wherever possible. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 established provisions which place a statutory duty on the Court of Appeal whenever it receives an appeal against sentence to consider whether it should frame a new sentencing guideline or revise an existing guideline.

The Act established a sentencing advisory panel to provide advice on such guidelines to the Court of Appeal. The panel will provide the court with statistical information about existing sentencing and consult a range of interested parties. The panel can act in three sets of circumstances: when advised by the Court of Appeal that it intends to frame a guideline, at its own instigation, and when the Home Secretary directs it to provide views to the court. This is an important development since the 1998 Act, designed to establish consistency of sentencing. It is a matter for consideration whether such sentences might be examined by the panel.

The Government are responsible for ensuring that the courts have the powers that they need to deal with the cases before them. We believe that the law should provide appropriate sanctions to enable the courts to deal severely with instances of bad driving that are worse than careless and in which the offender bears a greater responsibility for his actions.

Within the broad statutory limit set by Parliament, individual sentences are a matter for the courts alone, taking into account all the circumstances of the offence and the offender. Of course, the independence of our courts is an important principle. It is not appropriate, therefore, for me to interfere in specific cases and sentences passed in particular circumstances. However, I believe that Parliament and the public are entitled to expect the courts to impose long and heavy sentences in serious cases.

The maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving or causing death while under the influence of drink or drugs is 10 years' imprisonment. That was doubled from five years as recently as 1993. The maximum penalty for dangerous driving is two years' imprisonment. Careless driving carries a maximum fine of £2,500 and an obligatory endorsement of the offender's driving licence. I can well understand why, when someone causes a death by careless driving and a fine of this kind is imposed, real despair and anger is felt among the families concerned. It is an understandable response, which I share.

The Government decided to conduct a review of penalties in road traffic offences, which is taking place. It will include consideration of the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving, and we shall deal with some of the issues discussed. The provisions will, I hope, lead to more comprehensive sentencing guidelines, which will ensure greater consistency in sentencing. The offence of causing death by dangerous driving could be one of the offences considered in this way.

The Government are determined to address these issues very seriously as a matter of priority. They represent an important element in public confidence in the criminal justice system, and need to be properly addressed. I assure the House that the opinions expressed in the contributions to this evening's debate will be fully considered in the review.

Lord Whitty today announced a new speed camera funding system, with eight pilot schemes in Essex, Northampton, Thames valley, Nottingham, south Wales, Cleveland, Lincolnshire and Strathclyde. It will establish a much more coherent and effective regime for testing for people who are speeding, and will be able to identify and, we hope, deter speeding. That is an important and positive development, which will inhibit the reckless and speedy driving that is sometimes the immediate cause of the accidents that cause the tragedies which have been discussed.

Finally, I want to mention research. Road traffic law should provide a framework for safe driving, lay down clear standards for driver behaviour and deter drivers from breaching those standards. The Transport Research Laboratory of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is carrying out research on behalf of DETR into the way in which bad driving cases proceed through the criminal justice system. It is the intention of the research to obtain evidence as to whether there is sufficiently clear guidance on the law and its purpose, and how that affects the choice of penalty.

The researchers are looking in detail at the decisions taken by the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts. We expect to have the results next year, when the Government will be in a better position to judge changes in this area of law and its operation.

I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham secured this debate. The Government are fully in sympathy with the sentiments expressed by the hon. Gentleman and others during the debate. My Department and I will continue to work with colleagues from other Departments to ensure that we get our policy right in tackling these important and serious issues. I am glad to have had an opportunity to respond to the debate, and I am delighted to assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall receive a delegation to discuss the matter more widely and will continue to meet and discuss the issue with a wide range of different organisations.

In moving on these matters, it is exceptionally important to be in line with the body of public opinion. Law should properly reflect what people feel. That is why this debate has been important. The whole range of views expressed will be fully taken into account.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 20 December 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Television Licences

1. **Mr. Harry Barnes** (North-East Derbyshire): What arrangements he is making to ensure that rights to free television licences apply for those who are obliged to purchase a television licence covering periods both prior to and after their 75th birthday. [101995]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Janet Anderson): The Government anticipate that the arrangements for free television licences for pensioners aged 75 and over will incorporate provisions for refunds for unexpired licences. We intend to announce shortly full details of the scheme's operation.

Mr. Barnes: I welcome that reply and the movement towards free television licences for those aged 75 and over. Has not that provision established an important principle—that, in some circumstances, people can get free television licences? We can build on that in future and on the principle of benefits being provided on a universal basis.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is right. The intention of the concession is to help older pensioners who are more likely to rely on television for information and entertainment. They are also more likely to live on low incomes: nearly half the pensioners who are over 75 are in the bottom three income bands. The concession will assist some 40 per cent. of pensioner households.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Does the Minister agree that all those who are to get free television licences—a measure that I support—and, indeed, those who are not, are entitled to expect value for money from the BBC? In the light of the report of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, which was published this morning, does she agree that the BBC should show that it is eliminating waste before it demands more money? It should seriously consider scrapping News 24 and use the money to support BBC local radio and BBC World, both of which valued services are underfunded.

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government are keen for the BBC and anyone else to take steps to eliminate waste. We shall make our decisions on the Davies proposals in January and we shall take account of the Select Committee recommendations.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Does my hon. Friend know that there are currently concessions on television licences for pensioners in sheltered accommodation, but that when someone who needs sheltered accommodation but is not of pensionable age moves into the same complex, it puts the concessionary television licence in jeopardy for everyone in the complex? My local authority is experiencing increasing problems with that, and I should be grateful for an assurance from the Minister that she will examine the matter.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to that continuing problem. The Government were the first to realise that the current system is anomalous and unfair. We are still considering the recommendations of the Davies report on existing concessionary arrangements in the light of responses to the public consultation. An announcement will be made in January.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does the Minister agree that it would be ironic if television licences were free for over-75s, while everyone else, rich and poor, was hit by a digital licence fee? Does she realise that, if such a fee were introduced, it would be wholly characteristic of the Government in that it would amount to yet another stealth tax?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman should not be too presumptuous. As I have already said, the Government are still considering the Davies report recommendations, and we shall make an announcement in January.

Tourism (River Thames)

2. **Mr. Keith Darvill** (Upminster): If he will make a statement about the promotion of leisure and tourism services on the River Thames, with particular reference to the role of London River Services. [101996]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Janet Anderson): The Government are keen for the vast tourism potential of the River Thames to be maximised in a sustainable way. We are supportive of the work that London River Services has undertaken towards furthering our objective of improving and enhancing the river. We are confident that it fully shares our view that the objective includes promoting the use of the river for tourism and leisure purposes, as well as transport. I was glad to have the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those important issues for London.

Mr. Darvill: I thank my hon. Friend for that statement. She will appreciate the fact that the River Thames attracts more than 2 million sightseeing and restaurant cruise passengers every year, which generates some £30 million of revenue. However, does she agree that, when granting licences to river operators, London River Services should take account of existing contractual arrangements as well as past investment and future planned investment?

Janet Anderson: Precisely for those reasons, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport

and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), recently wrote to London River Services. He said:

"We recognise the wish to protect"—

the investment that has already been put in

"and the need, in promoting new services, to have regard to the well-being of existing operators, and I know you are taking steps to ensure these matters are evaluated systematically when new licences are being considered."

I reassure my hon. Friend that, because of my Department's interest in tourism, we shall keep a close watch on developments. I know that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary recognises the importance of tourism on the Thames, particularly for the millennium year, during which we anticipate that about 2.4 million extra visitors will be attracted by the millennium dome, which is now the international symbol of the millennium.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I am grateful to the Minister for her paving answer. Can she now tell us whether the Under-Secretary has received a reply from London River Services?

Janet Anderson: I am sorry if the right hon. Gentleman is disappointed with my reply, but I have given him all the assurances that he needs. He knows, too, that he came to see me, with my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), to discuss the issue. I am confident that we have assured him that the Government recognise the importance of tourism and of continuing to maintain those services on the River Thames.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Now that Lord Justice Clarke's inquiry has confirmed that the river is safe for use for the millennium festival and beyond, can the Minister ensure that information is easily available and accessible on websites and elsewhere so that there is maximum use of the river to provide an alternative to road and land-based transport throughout next year? Will she and her colleagues get on with putting the final safety measure in place and take the legislation through the House quickly to make sure that people cannot drink and drive on the river, just as they cannot drink and drive on land?

Janet Anderson: On the latter point, I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government will, of course, do everything they need to do and can do to ensure people's safety on that important occasion. A number of websites make available the information to which he refers and I shall, if I may, write to him with the details of those.

Museums

3. **Ms Linda Perham** (Ilford, North): What support his Department gives to local museums. [101997]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): My Department directly sponsors 12 national and five non-national museums and galleries. Its support to the wider museums sector is channelled via the Museums and Galleries Commission.

Ms Perham: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. My local council in the London borough of Redbridge will open its first ever museum in spring 2000, after many years of campaigning by local people. Will he join me in congratulating the councillors and officers of the London borough of Redbridge and the local groups and individuals who have worked hard for this much-wanted facility? What support does his Department give to local museums at local level?

Mr. Smith: I can certainly join my hon. Friend in heartily congratulating the borough of Redbridge on its initiative in establishing a new museum in Ilford central library. I am pleased that it has received a grant of £182,000 from the heritage lottery fund. That has been matched by a contribution of £263,000 from the borough itself, which speaks volumes for its commitment.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): What confidence can we have in anything that the Secretary of State says about museums? In the first three months of this Parliament, did the Government not give a pledge that there would be universal free admission to the nation's galleries and museums by 2001? Has that pledge been dropped?

Mr. Smith: No such pledge was given. Indeed, I shall quote to the hon. Gentleman from our document "A New Cultural Framework", which we published in summer 1998. It set out our programme for the succeeding three years, and said:

"In order to widen access to our great national collections, extra funds have been allocated to the national museums and galleries which charge for admission to allow free entry for children from next year,"—

that is done—

"and for children and pensioners in the following year."

That is shortly to happen. The document continues:

"These are the first stages in our programme of broadening free access to the great national collections; funds have also been set aside to take this programme further in 2001."

That will be done.

Public Libraries

4. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What steps he is taking to encourage greater use of public libraries; and if he will make a statement. [101998]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We have raised the profile of the public library service through the introduction of annual library plans and the forthcoming minimum service standards. We have also, through the new opportunities fund, committed significant direct investment to enable libraries to offer a new range of information technology services, along with funding to promote reader development programmes.

Helen Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, but does he agree that many families, particularly those on low incomes, have relied on library services not only for factual knowledge but for access to the world's great literature, and that they were seriously hampered by the scandalous neglect of the book stock under the previous Government? Will he assure me that he will continue to monitor library services and ensure that they

receive resources adequate to provide a varied supply of books in good condition, so that readers can once again make proper use of our great public library system?

Mr. Smith: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend. Work currently under way with the Local Government Association and the Library Association on the setting of minimum standards will ensure that the maintenance of a comprehensive book stock that is in good condition is very much one of the standards that we expect libraries to meet.

I have responsibilities under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to ensure that library authorities provide a full and comprehensive service to their local population. The work on the setting of minimum standards is the first time that a Government have taken this issue seriously and set about defining what those minimum standards should be.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Is the Secretary of State aware that last year a mobile library service in Suffolk was shut by the Labour-controlled county council, and another is threatened for closure this coming year? Will he assure me that he will speak to the Deputy Prime Minister to ensure that Suffolk gets the standard spending assessment that it deserves, so that it can continue to fund mobile library services?

Mr. Smith: This year's settlement for local authorities has been better than for any of the previous seven years. It is up to individual local authorities to decide their own spending priorities. However, earlier this year we were concerned about the plans for the future of library services in a number of local authorities. I am pleased to say that, as a result of the action that we took at that time, six of those library authorities have now dropped their closure plans.

Disabled Sport

5. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What plans he has to increase support for disabled sport. [101999]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): Through our Sport for All policy, we are determined to promote sport for people with disabilities. In this financial year, more than £1 million of Exchequer funding will go to sport for people with disabilities, which is an increase of about 28 per cent. In addition, from November 1997 to April 2000, the British Paralympics Association will have received more than £1.8 million from the world-class performance funding programme.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. Will she join me in congratulating the local partnership of Harrow council, Harrow Mencap and Harrow special olympics committee on successfully securing Millennium Commission funding to develop a new and expanded Harrow special olympics in September next year aimed at disabled children and children with learning difficulties in my constituency and the neighbouring area? Is not that precisely the type of partnership that we should encourage to promote access to Sport for All? What other action has she taken, and what further action does she propose to take, to promote such partnerships?

Kate Hoey: I certainly want to congratulate everyone in Harrow involved in that partnership to ensure that Sport for All really means sport for all, including people with disabilities. Since I became Minister, I have made a point of visiting as many of the disabled events around the country as possible, including the cerebral palsy European athletic championships. I was pleased about the launch of the English Federation for Disability Sport. For the first time, disability sport is speaking with one voice. A united voice for disability sport will be heard, especially by the Government.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Like me, the Minister has had a long-standing commitment to helping with disabled sport. Is she embarrassed by the fact that, before she became Minister for Sport, the Government's raid on the national lottery resulted in sport's total share of lottery funding falling from 28 per cent. to 18 per cent? Is she concerned that the Government's obsession with their pet project is having a knock-on effect on disabled sport, which is dear to her heart as it is to mine? Will she ensure that that cut is reversed in the Government's future programme? Will she also try to ensure that, in future national sporting projects, including the Wembley fiasco, proper facilities are available for disabled sportsmen and sportswomen?

Kate Hoey: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman has been, because he should be aware that more than £1.9 billion from the national lottery has gone into sport over the past five years. Money from the new opportunities fund is going to after-school activities, which include sport. People involved in sport at the grassroots feel much more confident about its future because of national lottery funding and because the Government are determined to make sport a huge priority among our other priorities. Within that, disabled sport—about which the hon. Gentleman, like all hon. Members, feels strongly—will be protected.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): Does the Minister recognise that sport for the disabled—along with, probably, many other kinds of British sport—is particularly successful in terms of the winning of gold medals? Should we not ensure that people take up sport as early as possible, especially in our schools? Will the Minister ensure that the schools co-ordinators who will be appointed later this year and next year have a specific responsibility to ensure that sport is played by disabled people from an early age? Will she also ensure not only that such sport is played between schools but that facilities are available locally so that disabled people can continue to play subsequently?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is right: what happens in our schools is the bedrock, or foundation, of our country's sporting future. I hope that the co-ordinators will consider their job to be promoting sport between schools

throughout the country and ensuring that sport for disabled young people is just as high a priority as sport for everyone else.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): We appreciate the money that has been invested to help those with disabilities to participate in sport, and the Minister will know of the thrill felt by people, young and old, who now have that opportunity. In her capacity as Minister for Sport, is she keeping in touch with those in devolved regions to ensure that equal opportunities prevail throughout the United Kingdom?

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman is right: it is crucial for all of us in the United Kingdom to work together to ensure that people with disabilities can fulfil their potential. Part of the role of the "sports cabinet" is to bring together representatives of different parts of the United Kingdom, and to prevent the difficulties envisaged by the hon. Gentleman. The aim is to unite in ensuring that people with disabilities have opportunities, and we are clearly going to do that.

Opera Tickets

7. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the use of public funds to ensure that tickets at the Royal Opera house are being sold at a lower price than before the refurbishment took place. [102001]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We believe that the board and management of the Royal Opera house have responded to the Government's desire for Covent Garden to be open to a broader audience and for the public to have the widest possible access to performances—for instance, through lower ticket prices. I understand that the Royal Opera house will keep the pricing structure under review and will continue to ensure that tickets are available at a wide range of prices.

Mr. Rendel: Does the Secretary of State realise that a couple on the basic state pension would now have to spend about a third of their weekly income to buy a couple of tickets for the Royal Opera house, even at the lowest price? How does that square with what was said by the Minister for the Arts in an Adjournment debate on Government funding for the arts only three weeks ago? He said then that he was

"unashamedly committed to making culture accessible to the many, not the few".—[*Official Report*, 26 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 914.]

Does that mean culture, except the Royal Opera house?

Mr. Smith: No; it means culture, including the Royal Opera house. In fact—this may be of particular interest to the pensioner couple to whom the hon. Gentleman referred—222 tickets are available, at £6 each, for matinee performances of a full-length opera there.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): That is good news for all of us, including the impoverished and the old.

Will my right hon. Friend talk seriously to those at the Royal Opera house about provision for the disabled? There is a real problem in that regard, and, if they are genuinely concerned, they must allow free access for all. I sent in some distressing details today, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will have a right go at them.

Mr. Smith: I very much take on board my hon. Friend's point. The issue of access to the Royal Opera house for those with disabilities is crucial. The building work that has been undertaken has resulted in substantial improvements, but there is room for further progress, and I will consider carefully what my hon. Friend has said.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Is it true that the Secretary of State has sought an assurance from the Royal Opera house that there will be no more "black tie" evenings? If so, why?

Mr. Smith: No.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): I welcome the new price structure, which is definitely an improvement, but is my right hon. Friend aware that the Royal Opera house has discontinued the practice of selling a number of tickets in the gods on the day of performances? Does he agree that that limits accessibility, particularly to those less well off opera fans who do not have the luxury of planning their lives for months ahead? Will he use whatever influence he has to try to make the Royal Opera house think again about that practice?

Mr. Smith: I shall certainly draw my hon. Friend's point to the attention of the Royal Opera house authorities. However, in their defence, for the first three months of programming since the Royal Opera house re-opened, some 88,000 tickets have been available for public sale at the box office.

Tourism Promotion

8. **Mr. Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port and Neston): How he is encouraging the use of IT to promote tourism in England. [102002]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The Government's strategy, "Tomorrow's Tourism", has many IT initiatives for tourism in Britain. The English Tourism Council is working with industry partners to help tourism destinations to make appropriate use of IT, both for consumers and to sustain competitiveness.

Mr. Miller: My hon. Friend has seen some of the exciting new tourist attractions in my constituency, which, incidentally, attract some 5.5 million day visitors, for which there is little recognition through the standard spending assessment. Does she agree that Warner Cinemas, Blue Planet, Cheshire Oaks and others could benefit from working together, using some of the new technologies jointly to promote those superb new facilities?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is right. I had the opportunity only last week to see at first hand the successful co-operation between my hon. Friend, his local

council, Warner Cinemas and Cheshire Oaks retail development to attract millions of day visitors to his constituency, but the use of IT is important in further developing tourism. That is why the English Tourism Council, through its tourism technology working group, has already produced guidance entitled "Impact Through IT" for England's tourism organisations. We will provide a progress report on the development of Destination Management Systems for the tourism summit on 1 March next year.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I wonder whether the Minister can help me. When will the English Tourism Council be allowed to market itself and its services?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Lady will know that we were keen to ensure that the English Tourism Council provided much-needed research for the industry throughout the country, which it had been difficult for the English tourist board to do. She will also know that the establishment of the council has provided additional funding for the regions. We are looking to the regions to improve their marketing as a result of that additional funding, and we shall make announcements shortly.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend think that there is a place for developing IT for specialist tourism industries, such as industrial heritage? I particularly have in mind the designated status that the cotton mills in her constituency and mine have received today, which is a welcome move.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is right. His constituency is next to mine and we both welcome that announcement because we have many industrial heritage attractions. He is also right to highlight the importance of new innovative forms of tourism. The British Tourist Authority, to which the Government recently allocated an additional £5 million, is launching 36 new websites that will highlight those new forms of tourism, which have huge development potential. He mentions industrial heritage. Other forms of tourism that the Government are anxious to promote are sport tourism—I am discussing a strategy on that with my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport—and film tourism.

Wembley Stadium

9. **Mr. John Greenway** (Ryedale): If he will make a statement on the report on the future of the Wembley Stadium project. [102003]

10. **Mr. James Clappison** (Hertsmere): If he will make a statement on the progress of the new National Stadium project at Wembley. [102004]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We have now received comments from all the relevant parties on the Ellerbe Becket report. I am grateful for the detailed work that has been undertaken by everyone involved. Although many of the issues have been resolved, concerns remain about the quality of the sightlines, the costs and time involved in reconfiguring the stadium for athletics and the long-term value for money involved.

My statement to the House on 1 December and subsequent work have ensured that all parties are now working closely together to find the best possible solution for both football and international athletics. Further detailed work is under way. I hope to be in a position to report good progress within the next few days.

Mr. Greenway: The whole House will be grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's answer. However, how often has he discussed the project with the Prime Minister—bearing in mind that, on the world cup 2006 bid brochure, the Prime Minister's photograph was taken against an artist's impression of the revamped Wembley stadium? Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the project could be built on time to secure the world cup 2006 bid? If not, and if the whole thing goes belly-up, does he agree not only that he and his Department should be in the dock but that the matter should be seen as a major embarrassment for the Prime Minister?

Mr. Smith: Wembley remains the centrepiece of our world cup 2006 bid, and one of the strengths of that bid is that the Government continue to give it the strongest possible support. Yes, Wembley will be there in time to form the principal stadium for the 2006 world cup, which we hope to secure for England.

Mr. Clappison: Is there still a place for future Olympic games at Wembley?

Mr. Smith: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not listening carefully to my previous answer. As I said, concern remains about sightlines and cost in relation to international athletics events at Wembley. Those issues are currently under very detailed analysis.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his remarks about being on track for the world cup in 2006, which I am sure will be well received by everyone. Will he just confirm that his Department will continue to liaise very closely with Sir Nigel Mobbs and the Wembley task force to ensure that, in the reconstruction of the stadium, sight is not lost of regeneration of the whole area—which the Wembley task force has been established to procure?

Mr. Smith: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I have met Sir Nigel Mobbs on three occasions in the past two weeks, and we are absolutely determined that the future of Wembley as a premier stadium—be it only for football, or for football and athletics—should enable wider regeneration of the area around the stadium, which is so greatly needed for my hon. Friend's constituents.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, if it is true that Twickenham is to get the world cup athletics, before that announcement is made the Government will provide no money, and no lottery money, until a proper infrastructure report has been done on Twickenham?

Mr. Smith: Twickenham is, indeed, a potential option that is being considered as an alternative venue for international athletics. We are still undertaking substantial detailed work on the matter, but shall of course want to

ensure that absolute confidence can be had in Twickenham's suitability for athletics in all its aspects before lottery money is committed.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): In the light of the almost unbelievable shambles surrounding the project, what assessment has the right hon. Gentleman made of his own credibility as Secretary of State?

Mr. Smith: Excellent, as always.

Mr. Ainsworth: I am afraid that that will not do. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, whatever he may think of his handling of the Wembley project—he may think that it is excellent, but he is the only one who does—the entire sporting world regards it as a painful embarrassment.

Mr. Smith: I am afraid that the last two words more accurately describe the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Ainsworth: The Secretary of State is wriggling badly, but he will not get away. Is it not the case that, in May, he knew that there were serious problems; in July, he described the design as "stunning"; in November, his Minister said that the design was no good; and, in December, he proclaimed a 15-day deadline to sort the whole mess out? The 15 days of dither have ended, but no solution has been found. Every day that passes represents another blow to our bids for the world cup, the world athletics championship and a future Olympic games. Having floundered around looking for solutions, the Secretary of State is now on the lookout for scapegoats. May I suggest to him that all he has to do is look in the mirror? If he cannot get a grip of the project, why does he not make room for somebody who can?

Mr. Smith: Oh dear. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that the Government are not playing silly games but conducting the serious business of sorting out serious problems. We are close to a solution of those very real problems, and, as I said in my initial answer, I hope to be able to report good progress within the next few days.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): Should not my right hon. Friend ignore the comments of the Conservative party? The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) is merely talking down Britain's hopes of staging international competitions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if he can make the correct decision by bringing football and athletics to the proper arenas—a separate football stadium at Wembley and provision elsewhere for athletics—and if he carries on ignoring the Opposition by getting on with the job that he is doing excellently, all will be well?

Mr. Smith: I should prefer not to ignore the Opposition as I should prefer an Opposition who would approach matters sensibly and constructively. Sadly, we do not have them.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the Secretary of State agree that if he wants a premier stadium at Wembley, we will need facilities to allow people to reach it by road and rail? What is being done in that regard?

Mr. Smith: That issue is of course important to any major stadium. The flow of people to and from events in concentrated numbers during concentrated periods is one of the major issues that must always be considered, and we must do so for Wembley. That is why Sir Nigel Mobbs—together with the London borough of Brent—has been asked to establish a Wembley task force so that the wider regeneration of the area and infrastructure issues can be addressed.

Arts for Children

11. **Mr. Colin Burgon** (Elmet): What plans he has for new initiatives in the arts for children as part of the reorganisation of the Arts Council for England. [102005]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): I am pleased to inform my hon. Friend that the Arts Council's announcement last week included an additional £300,000 over two years for young people's theatre, in addition to large increases for several arts organisations working with children.

Mr. Burgon: I thank my right hon. Friend and welcome the fact that, under the Labour Government, funding for the arts is running at record levels. However, the recent Gulbenkian Foundation report "Crossing the Lines" highlighted worrying trends in gender, age and class when it comes to access to the arts. What would be the best strategy to confront those worrying trends?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the Gulbenkian report, which is an extremely interesting and challenging document. It is precisely because we share some concerns highlighted in the report that we have established the new audiences fund through the Arts Council. It provides grants to pilot projects aimed at attracting new and younger audiences. We are also backing the new generation audiences scheme, which will provide free tickets to cultural events for schoolchildren and encourage them to exchange information using the latest technologies. That is why the funding agreement that we have put in place with the Arts Council requires an additional 200,000 educational sessions to be secured for the extra funding that we are providing.

Lottery Spending

12. **Mr. David Watts** (St. Helens, North): What assessment he has made of public attitudes towards spending lottery money on health and education projects. [102006]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): Lottery money for health and education is distributed by the new opportunities fund, set up by the National Lottery Act 1998. The fund's establishment was supported by 92.5 per cent. of those who responded to the White Paper that set out the Government's proposals before the Act was passed.

Mr. Watts: I thank my hon. Friend, but does she agree that most people in Britain would rather see their lottery

money spent on health and education projects than on some of the side issues currently and regularly funded, and would want more money to be spent in that way?

Kate Hoey: As my hon. Friend suggests, it is true that people like to see national lottery money spent on something of which they approve. Money going through the new opportunities fund will cover a variety of ideas relevant to a range of activities including those for after school and at healthy living centres, and people clearly feel strongly that they want money to be spent in that way. The money is, of course, additional and it is important to note that it does not in any way replace Government expenditure.

Opera Tickets

13. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): What discussions he has had with the board of the Royal Opera house on the level of ticket prices. [102007]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): I have discussed ticket pricing with Sir Colin Southgate, other board members and Michael Kaiser on a number of occasions. The board and management of the Royal Opera house are committed to enabling the public to experience world-class opera and ballet at affordable prices.

Mr. Leigh: But the truth is that there would have been many more seats available at affordable prices if the Secretary of State had not raided the national lottery so that the money available for good causes such as this has decreased from 28 to 18 per cent. Is it not the case that once the friends and corporate entertainers have taken their share, there will be a limited number of tickets at prices people can afford? Getting one of those tickets will mean joining the new ruling class, either by working for the likes of Bernie Ecclestone or marrying into the Sainsbury family

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman confuses his capital and his revenue. The funds for the refurbishment of the Royal Opera house through the national lottery were funds for capital building work. Funds to support cheaper ticket prices at the Royal Opera house come through annual revenue subsidy from the Exchequer. We have increased those funds by 25 per cent. between this year and next year.

Museum Entry Fees

14. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): If he will make a statement on the future of entry fees for museums. [102008]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): Funds have been made available to permit free access for children from April this year and for pensioners from April 2000 to the currently charging national museums funded by my Department.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Is not this another example of the Government's policy being in utter chaos? Before the election, they promised universal free access to museums. When they came to power, a study found that the cost involved was simply unsustainable. In 1998, they did a U-turn to allow free access to children and, next year, pensioners. Could the Secretary of State tell us what the policy will be in the future? Is not the present policy unsustainable, and unfair to those on low pay and to disabled people?

Mr. Smith: First, we made no such commitment in our manifesto before the election. Secondly, we have done far better than we set out in our manifesto. I should have thought that a 22 per cent. increase in the number of children visiting our national museums and galleries since April of this year, as a result of introducing free admission, is something to be proud of, not carp about.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (Knowsley, South): Charging entrance fees is a way for museums to raise money to balance their budgets and manage their business. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the recent furore caused by the revelation that the British museum was hiring out the Duveen gallery for corporate functions. Given the sensitivities raised by that revelation among the many hon. Members who place a great value on the Parthenon sculptures, would my right hon. Friend convey to the director of the British museum their concern that the museum chose to inaugurate the recent conference of experts, convened to examine the damage done to the Parthenon sculptures during their time in the British museum, by holding a function with refreshments in the Duveen gallery?

Mr. Smith: I am indeed aware of the concern to which my hon. Friends refers, and I am sure that the authorities at the British museum will note what he has said. However, I believe that the Parthenon sculptures in the British museum, which are available for free to 6.5 million visitors every year, are in the right place.

Tourism (East Midlands)

15. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): What strategies he is using to promote tourism in the east midlands area. [102009]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The measures the Government and the industry are taking under the national tourism strategy "Tomorrow's Tourism" will help to promote the well-being of the industry in all regions, including the east midlands.

Judy Mallaber: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Will she note the recent report commissioned from the heart of England tourism board showing that tourists spend £61 million a year in Amber Valley and support 1,900 jobs? That is a 50 per cent. increase in expenditure over the past four years, and is largely the result of the mix of countryside, historic buildings and, increasingly, our industrial heritage.

Will my hon. Friend also note that we do not have high-expense venues such as the Royal Opera house that

attract major funding, although we have benefited from the smaller awards of the lottery scheme? Will she promote our industrial heritage as a major part of our tourism strategy? Will she especially consider an early promotion for the national heritage corridor in the Derwent valley from the tentative to the final list of world heritage sites? That area was a cradle of the industrial revolution, with the historic mills of the Arkwrights and the Strutts. It now has museums that preserve our transport heritage.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend will of course know that the designation of national heritage sites is a matter for my hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts. I will bring her remarks to his attention.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of tourism to Amber Valley. I pay tribute to her support for the development of tourism in her constituency. As she will be aware, all regional tourist boards have recently submitted proposals, which will form the basis of their work for the next three years, to take advantage of the additional funding that the Government are providing for tourism in the regions. Is not that further evidence of the Government's commitment to the development of tourism—the fastest growing industry in the world—in stark contrast to the record of the Opposition?

Heritage Lottery Fund

16. **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): If he will make a statement on the role of the heritage lottery fund in purchasing important works of art. [R] [102010]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The heritage lottery fund has so far committed about £59.9 million to support the purchase of works of art by museums and galleries throughout the UK. Heritage lottery fund trustees have agreed to set aside £10 million a year to support museum and gallery acquisitions of all kinds, including works of art, which will add to the enjoyment of visitors and encourage an increase in their numbers.

Mr. Brooke: Although I am aware of some notable contributions by the heritage lottery fund—notably for the Botticelli in Edinburgh—there has been some unpredictability in the fairly recent past. Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the decision of the heritage lottery fund in making so firm an announcement?

Mr. Smith: I do indeed. I also very much welcome the grant that made possible the purchase of the Botticelli, thus saving it for the nation. By contrast, I note that the annual report of the National Art Collections Fund for 1994—a year that the right hon. Gentleman may recall—stated:

> "We very much regret the reduced Government support for national museums in the 1994 budget."

That is something that we are trying to put right.

National Lottery Licence

18. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on the rules and specification for the renewal of the national lottery licence. [102012]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The new national lottery licence will be awarded by the National Lottery Commission. The commission published its invitation to apply on 30 November, which sets out what bidders for the new licence are required to do.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I thank the Secretary of State for that information. Would he prefer the licensee who operates and administers the national lottery to do so without profit, or does he hope that the operator will be the person who brings in the maximum revenue to the Exchequer and good causes? Alternatively, is he keeping his fingers crossed and hoping for both?

Mr. Smith: We have consistently said that we would welcome a good, not-for-profit bid for the running of the lottery. However, the prime test must be the amount of money raised for the good causes. The best way to secure that is through strong competition between potential bidders.

Millennium Dome

20. **Ms Bridget Prentice** (Lewisham, East): What assessment he has made of the extra visitors to and money to be spent in London and the UK next year as a result of the millennium dome. [102015]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The British Tourist Authority has estimated the number of overseas visits to the UK in 2000 at 27.5 million. Of these, the New Millennium Experience Company foresees that 2.5 million will visit the dome.

Ms Prentice: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but I wonder whether she would expand on it. Given the success of yesterday's exercise, in which local people saw and experienced the dome and its contents, does she agree that, as there is a debate about not only a north-south divide but a regional divide in this country, the experiences of the local people in Greenwich and Lewisham will be greatly enhanced by the extra money that will come into the area?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is quite right. The British Tourist Authority has estimated that, as a direct result of the millennium experience, an additional £300 million to £500 million of overseas tourist revenue will be brought into the UK economy as a whole, but that the halo effect of those activities could double that figure.

I invite Opposition Members to join us in—in the words of the Prime Minister—celebrating a triumph of confidence over cynicism, boldness over blandness and excellence over mediocrity, and to get together with us to celebrate something that has become the international symbol of the millennium.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church Investments

29. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of Church investments in the world's poorest countries. [101985]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The Church Commissioners have a small number of investments in emerging markets but risks are obviously higher in those areas and their duty as trustees constrains them to concentrate on the better established and more liquid markets.

Mr. Prentice: I think I heard my hon. Friend say that the Church had a small number of investments in the poorest countries. That disappoints me. After the statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the weekend that Britain will extinguish the debt of 25 of the poorest countries, surely we could capitalise on what the Church did so magnificently with the Jubilee 2000 campaign.

I understand that my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development are to meet Christian Aid and other Church leaders on Tuesday—tomorrow. Would not it be a magnificent tribute for the Church to tell the Chancellor that it was going to re-balance its very large portfolio to benefit some of the poorest countries?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out that Christian Aid and the Church were in the vanguard of seeking to have third-world debt wiped out. We are very grateful that the Chancellor of the Exchequer followed the lead of the Church in that matter.

As far as our investments are concerned, the Church Commissioners are always conscientious concerning issues that relate to not only environmental performance but human rights. We are sensitive to the communities and the countries in which they operate.

Millennium

30. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What initiatives the Church Commissioners are taking to mark the millennium in a permanent way. [101986]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The Church has concentrated its efforts on making a permanent impact on people's lives rather than on material objects. This is encompassed under the NewStart banner: NewStart with God, with the world's poor and at home.

Hon. Members may like to know that the national gallery in Trafalgar square will mark the millennium by the Seeing Salvation exhibition, which will explore how the figure of Christ has been represented in the western tradition.

In addition, the Open Churches Trust is giving encouragement for every church bell in the land to be rung on new year's day, followed by a short time of prayer.

Mr. Hughes: That is welcome. In 12 days' time we begin the celebration of the millennial year. Sometimes people suppose that the millennium is 1 January, but the millennium is actually Christmas day next year, and the whole year builds up to that. May I ask the hon. Gentleman to put to the Church Commissioners a proposal that might be a bit more permanent? Will he suggest that they invite the leaders of the Church around the world to address the following question: how will they follow the command,

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth"?

The Church is very wealthy, and much of that wealth should not be held by the Church. How can Church leaders put it towards winning people for Christ, instead of keeping themselves in finery for the next 100 years?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for quoting the scriptures and for referring to one that I like very much. The other one that I like is to the effect that we should not store up treasures where dust and moths may consume them. However, let us leave dust and moths aside for one moment, as I deal with the hon. Gentleman's question.

The millennium and the Christian celebrations of it will be a year-long and not simply a one-day wonder. Faiths throughout the world have recognised fully that it is a very important Christian event; it should be supported by Christians and respected by other faiths. As the hon. Gentleman said, we, as Christians and members of other faiths, should all come together to alleviate poverty throughout the world.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend accept that most people would very much welcome his statement that it is much more important to spend money on tackling real problems in the world than it is to build an obelisk or a memorial that would be a total waste of money?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The Archbishop of York wrote an interesting article in a Sunday newspaper in which he said that the millennium dome was important, but that the dome at St. Paul's was equally important. When it comes to spending and investing money, the responsibility of the Church Commissioners is to pay the stipends and the pensions of the clergy and bishops, and even the bishops' expenses.

Church Investments

31. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What progress has been made on reducing VAT on church repairs; and if he will make a statement. [101987]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The hon. Lady will recall my recent Adjournment debate on this subject in which she reminded the House of her long and active involvement in this matter. My hon. Friend the Paymaster General, responding to the debate, acknowledged the existence of a report published by the joint committee of the

national amenity societies which seeks to quantify the VAT on repair costs borne by the Church and others with regard to listed buildings.

Miss McIntosh: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that reply. I am also grateful for his support for my campaign and for allowing me to intervene in his excellent Adjournment debate recently. Could he join forces with me to convince the Paymaster General that churches qualify as historic buildings for the purposes of the annexe to the European directive under which we seek to reduce VAT rates on church repairs? Does he not agree that perhaps the best way to mark the millennium year is by lowering the rate of VAT on church repairs?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments. The Church at all levels, from the parishes and dioceses to central bodies and specialist advisory bodies such as the Council for the Care of Churches, will continue to call for fairer VAT treatment. I very much support their continuing efforts and those of the hon. Lady.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Over the Christmas recess, will my hon. Friend look at the remarkable book by Mr. Simon Jenkins on his 1,000 favourite churches? One realises from that book how many of those churches are in areas that in mediaeval times were very prosperous, but that are now depopulated and where the congregations simply are too few to support the necessary repairs that must be made. In those circumstances, are not the alternatives either to do something about the problem through VAT or to lose the glories of mediaeval architecture across Britain?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting the matter in the context of the Church's history and tradition. We, as Church Commissioners, have always said that there should be a reform of VAT that helps with church repairs. We are mindful of the fact that £12 million has been made available through English Heritage towards the repair of churches of all denominations and religions—Christian and non-Christian—and of historical places of worship. Despite the input of English Heritage and the commissioners, the heavy burden of VAT on repairs makes it very difficult for us to fulfil the tasks to which my hon. Friend referred.

GM Organisms

32. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If the commissioners will make a statement on the proposed use of genetically modified organisms on their land. [101988]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The Church Commissioners are currently awaiting advice from the Church of England ethical investment advisory group, which develops a co-ordinated ethical investment policy for the Church, and which is currently involved in a detailed study and consultation process regarding genetically modified organisms.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I wish the hon. Gentleman and his fellow Church Commissioners the compliments of the season.

In view of the widespread interest in and controversy surrounding genetically modified foods, will the hon. Gentleman tell the House exactly what was agreed at the ethical investment advisory group meeting on 1 December?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. No policy decisions affecting genetically modified organisms were made at the meeting on 1 December. At that meeting the members had an opportunity to discuss collectively the evidence presented so far and to weigh up, from a Christian perspective, the potential benefits and risks attendant on the technology.

The Church Commissioners are grateful to receive the best wishes of the season, and we extend such wishes to the entire House, including all right hon. and hon. Members and their staff.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Government Resources and Accounts Bill

33. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What increase in spending will be necessary to accommodate extra duties placed on the National Audit Office by the Government Resources and Accounts Bill. [101989]

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): The Public Accounts Commission has taken account of the growing work load of the National Audit Office, and we have recommended additional funding. That is partly as a result of the introduction of resource accounting as set out in the Government Resources and Accounts Bill. At the commission's meeting on 2 December to consider the NAO's new estimate, it approved an additional £1.3 million for 2000–01.

The other new duty placed on the Comptroller and Auditor General by the Bill is to audit and account to the whole of government. As that will not come into force until 2005, it is too early to say what the resource implications will be. Both the Public Accounts Commission and the Public Accounts Committee are seriously concerned about the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, which does not empower the CAG to scrutinise as full a range of public spending bodies as CAGs have done over the past 130 years. Representations have been made and are continuing.

Mr. Rendel: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that excellent reply, with which I fully concur. Has he made an estimate of what extra spending would be necessary if the National Audit Office were to audit all spending of taxpayers' money? I believe that the sum would be quite small.

Mr. Sheldon: Indeed it would be. If the NAO were to audit every single aspect of government spending through all the various bodies concerned which are not audited by the CAG at present, it would cost no more than about £1 million. The important point is that the Bill could be improved in a number of ways. It could grant to Parliament's auditors the same rights of access to public spending that Departments grant themselves. The Bill should replace the present illogical arrangements and make the CAG the auditor of all non-departmental public bodies. The CAG should audit publicly owned companies and the new departmental performance measures.

Point of Order

3.32 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. On Friday afternoon there was a press conference at which the Foreign Secretary outlined the British-crafted United Nations resolution on Iraq—to the effect that there could be light at the end of the tunnel. Since then, Baghdad has refuted the resolution—in my opinion, for understandable reasons. *[Interruption.]* Yes, for understandable reasons. This is an extremely important subject because of the on-going military action against Iraq and because of the appalling difficulties for the children of that country, which have been movingly described in the Sunday press and elsewhere. Have you, Madam Speaker, had any request from a Foreign Office Minister wishing to make a statement on that subject before we go into recess?

Madam Speaker: No. I have not been informed by the Foreign Office or any other Department that Ministers seek to make a statement—at least, not today.

BILLS PRESENTED

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Secretary Byers, Mr. Secretary Reid, Mr. Secretary Murphy, Mr. Secretary Mandelson and Mr. Mike O'Brien, presented a Bill to establish an Electoral Commission; to make provision about the registration and finances of political parties; to make provision about donations and expenditure for political purposes; to make provision about election and referendum campaigns; to make provision about election petitions and other legal proceedings in connection with elections; to reduce the qualifying periods set out in sections 1 and 3 of the Representation of the People Act 1985; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 34].

Public House Names

Mrs. Ann Winterton, supported by Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. Joe Benton, Rev. Martin Smyth and Mr. Jim Dobbin, presented a Bill to amend the law relating to the names of public houses; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 14 April, and to be printed [Bill 35].

Freedom of Religious Worship (Armed Forces)

Rev. Martin Smyth, supported by Mrs. Ann Winterton and Mr. Jim Dobbin, presented a Bill to amend and clarify the law to permit those serving in the armed forces openly to follow the religion of their choice; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 May, and to be printed [Bill 36].

Halogen Lamp Regulation (Motor Vehicles)

Mr. Jim Dobbin, supported by Mrs. Ann Winterton, Rev. Martin Smyth and Mr. Clive Efford, presented a Bill to regulate the intensity of motor vehicle lights; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 May, and to be printed [Bill 37].

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Clive Efford, supported by Mr. Keith Darvill, Mr. Matthew Taylor, Mr. David Chaytor, Ms Bridget Prentice and Mr. Cynog Dafis, presented a Bill to make further provision for energy efficiency: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 10 March, and to be printed [Bill 38].

Energy Conservation (Housing)

Mr. Clive Efford, supported by Mr. Keith Darvill, Mr. Matthew Taylor, Mr. David Chaytor, Ms Bridget Prentice and Mr. Cynog Dafis, presented a Bill to make further provision for energy conservation related to housing; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 10 March, and to be printed [Bill 39].

Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundaries (Amendment)

Mr. Archy Kirkwood presented a Bill to amend the Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundaries Order 1999 in so far as it relates to the East coast border between England and Scotland; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 28 January, and to be printed [Bill 40].

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified Her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Consolidated Fund (No.2) Act 1999

Points of Order

3.33 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is being announced on the electronic news media that the Solicitor-General said half an hour ago that there is to be no prosecution of Melita Norwood, the exposed spy, or of any other people connected with the matter. Have you received any request from any Minister to make a statement in this House. Surely a statement should have been made here before there was an announcement to the electronic news media—especially on an important matter that was the cause of much controversy and previously dealt with by Government statement—

Madam Speaker: Order. I have not heard from any Minister seeking to make a statement at this time.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I have answered the point of order; I have not been told by any Minister that he wants to make a statement. I cannot take the matter any further.

Mr. Hughes: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it a different point of order?

Mr. Hughes: Yes, it is separate.

Madam Speaker: Will the hon. Member please resume his seat?

I answered the point of order put to me: I know of no Minister who is seeking to make a statement in the House. I have been in the Chair since 2.30 pm, and can take the matter no further until I leave the Chamber, when I might find a Minister who is willing to make a statement. At the moment, I have the business to get on with and know of no Minister wanting to make a statement. I shall take a different point of order.

Mr. Hughes: There is a written question on today's Order Paper, which was tabled on Friday, on the subject just raised. Will you confirm your previous advice that it is the practice of the House that written questions should be answered at 3.30 pm, after Question Time, and that statements to the press before answers are made available to hon. Members should be made only after that time?

Madam Speaker: That is quite true. Questions are not to be answered before 3.30 pm; the hon. Member is perfectly correct and I am grateful to him.

Orders of the Day

Transport Bill

[Relevant documents from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee: Third Report of Session 1997–98, on The Proposed Strategic Rail Authority and Railway Regulation (HC 286-I); Fourth Report of Session 1997–98, on Air Traffic Control (HC 360-I), and the Government's response thereto (HC 843); Third Report of Session 1998–99, on The Future of National Air Traffic Services (HC 122), and the Government's response thereto (HC 794); Ninth Report of Session 1998–99, on the Integrated Transport White Paper (HC 32-I), and the Government's response thereto (HC 708); Minutes of Evidence taken before the Transport Sub-Committee, Session 1998–99, on Railway Regulation (HC 585-i); and Twenty-first Report of Session 1998–99, on the Railways Bill (HC 827), and the Government's response thereto (Cm 4538).]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I must inform Back Benchers that I am afraid that speeches must be limited to 15 minutes. I have selected the amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang).

3.37 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a proud moment for me, as Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. This Transport Bill is the first major Bill on the subject in more than 30 years. For me, improving transport goes to the heart of my politics. All issues for change in transport have been controversial but, in time, have been accepted.

I was a seaman, and I became a Member of Parliament at the end of the 1960s as one of the politically motivated few because I realised that only through Parliament could one reform and modernise the 19th century merchant shipping laws, reverse the decline of shipping and make life at sea safer. That has now been achieved.

In the 1970s, as a member of the former nationalised industries Select Committee, I recognised that public sector transport was in decline because it was restricted by silly Treasury rules and therefore unable to raise the necessary capital investment. In the 1980s, as an Opposition Front-Bench transport spokesman, I warned about the environmental consequences of just building roads to solve congestion and of ignoring the importance of public transport networks. That issue is now centre stage.

I was also an early advocate of public-private partnerships, when the major political parties—including my own—were opposed to them. Indeed, in 1991, I advocated the leasing through private finance of an order for Network SouthEast Trains. The Tory Government at that time eventually adopted the idea during the election campaign. The option not only provided new trains for the south-east through private financing, but saved the York works from closure. Unfortunately, within a very short period, we were back to old public sector financing arrangements, under which

[Mr. John Prescott]

money was denied and the plant—which we desperately need today to enable expansion of the railways—was closed. In the 1990s, I warned of the effects of letting, privatisation, deregulation and uncontrolled markets, which ruined the bus and rail networks.

I do not intend to waste time on the Tory record. The other week, during the debate on the so-called confidence motion proposed by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), whom we welcome back to the Opposition Front Bench, I said that I was happy to compare the Tory 18 years to Labour's two and a half. I think the House gave its judgment that night, as did the press the following day. In a depressing speech, the right hon. Gentleman failed to offer any alternatives. *The Times* had been right earlier, when it summed up his plans as:

"cheap populism, muddled thinking and a breath of stale air".

I trust that his response today will be different, but his articles in the weekend press about the rail industry did not make encouraging reading—especially from a man who is a Fellow of All Souls.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): The right hon. Gentleman is wrong even about that, but we shall leave that aside. Will he explain why, three days after claiming victory and assuring us that he was now safe in his job, he was stripped of most of his transport responsibilities? Will he tell us whether or not there has been a U-turn toward motoring and the car?

Mr. Prescott: I am the Secretary of State for transport, the environment, and the regions. I have transport Ministers who are responsible to me for the implementation of the strategic policy outlined in our White Paper. In addition, I reported to the House almost 12 months ago on my intentions in respect of local transport plans, which have recently been produced and which contain some of the road and bypass plans. Nothing has changed: we are carrying out our policies to reduce congestion, create a better public transport system and improve the environment, all of which objectives are opposed by the right hon. Gentleman.

For far too long, politicians have dodged the hard decisions and sacrificed long-term gain for short-term popularity. I have no intention of doing that. I am determined to make transport in this country modern, integrated, efficient, reliable and, above all, safe. We have made a good start and reversed decades of decline. We now have more buses, more trains, more passengers and record levels of investment in our public transport system. We are negotiating public-private partnerships to finance £7 billion-worth of tube investment. We have negotiated another public-private partnership to rescue the channel tunnel rail link, which had failed under the contract negotiated by the previous Administration. That deal is now on budget and on time and the risk is to be carried by the private sector.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): But there is a £5.6 billion Treasury guarantee.

Mr. Prescott: No, the private sector bears the risk. In addition, we will not pay the extra £1 billion requested for the rail link, but will direct that money to our education and health priorities.

As Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my approach on taking office was to set out a clear strategy for a better integrated transport system. Our White Paper "A New Deal For Transport: Better for Everyone" did that, by building on the consensus in favour of better integration of our transport system. The right hon. Member for Wokingham is outside that consensus, which was established under the previous Administration, and is leading his party further away from it. He is the extremist, just as his party was revealed to be this weekend by the ex-Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward).

We have set out the policy and much of it is already being implemented. Alongside that policy, the Bill reflects our radically new approach to funding public transport. That approach is based on public-private partnerships, which will combine the best skills of the public sector in providing public service with the expertise of the private sector in efficiency, innovation and project management. We shall ring-fence any future real increases in fuel duty for public transport and roads, and introduce new income streams of revenues from congestion charging and workplace parking to improve local transport. That implements the principle of hypothecation—a truly radical move, which no British Government have done before.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm whether or not the Government remain committed to adopting national road traffic reduction targets? If they are, when will they be published?

Mr. Prescott: The Government were never committed to that. When road traffic reduction legislation was considered by the House, we made it clear that we would report within one year on our proposals and on other means by which we could achieve the objectives of reducing congestion and environmental damage. The Commission for Integrated Transport has just reported to me, making it clear that those objectives can be achieved without banning the entry of cars into towns on the scale suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

Last Monday, I launched our 10-year programme to revitalise Britain's transport system.

Mr. Redwood: Does the right hon. Gentleman recall saying

"I will have failed if in five years' time there are not far fewer journeys by car"?

Does he know that the new Minister for Transport has said that of course there are going to be more journeys by car? Is that not a U-turn and has the Secretary of State not been overruled?

Mr. Prescott: The Minister for Transport said that there probably would be more cars. That is due to the success of our economy over the past two years. I said that there would be fewer car journeys. If the right hon. Gentleman went to Manchester, Brighton or Leeds, he would see that public transport has been improved. People are changing from using their cars to using public transport. That means that there are fewer journeys by car and more by public transport. That is being proved around the country. If he visited such places, he would be better informed.

For the first time, we will give transport the long-term stability and certainty that it needs, building on a strong and stable economy. We are prepared to take the difficult long-term decisions needed to improve the quality of public transport and reduce congestion through public transport plans. That is the basis of the approach to improving local public transport outlined in part II.

Part II includes our proposals to improve local transport services, particularly buses. The new local transport plans are the centrepiece of our approach to providing integrated transport at local planning level. They are the key to providing local solutions for local problems and set out our policies for the promotion of safe, integrated, efficient and economic transport facilities in each area. The Bill puts them on a statutory footing.

Last Thursday, we announced a local transport settlement for 2000-01 of £755 million. The total over three years for local transport will be £2.4 billion, including £700 million of additional expenditure. The Bill requires authorities to develop a bus strategy to ensure good quality bus services tailored to local circumstances. It puts the current voluntary quality partnerships on a statutory basis. That will allow all parties to invest with confidence. It will mean that local quality standards can be imposed to help reduce congestion and improve air quality in our towns and cities.

The Bill provides powers for local authorities to require bus operators to participate in integrated joint ticketing and bus passenger information schemes. It allows local authorities to enter into quality contracts for bus services to determine networks and service levels.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: I have never known a common-sense intervention from the hon. Gentleman in the past, so I have no desire to give way.

Such contracts will be subjected to a strict public interest test and will require the prior consent of the Secretary of State or of the National Assembly for Wales.

The Bill honours our promise to introduce a national minimum standard for local authority concessionary fare schemes. That will guarantee all pensioners at least half-fare on local buses if they buy the bus pass. That will benefit around 3 million pensioners. We think that that is right, and a good example of a good transport system meeting people's needs.

Part III introduces a radical new approach to road user charging and the workplace parking levy. It is clearly controversial. The Bill will grant powers to local authorities similar to those included in the Greater London Authority Act 1999. Such powers can be used only at the direct request of a local authority. The Bill provides that every penny of the net revenues raised from new charges will be retained locally and ring-fenced for spending on improvements to local transport for at least 10 years. Local authorities will have to submit their plans for charging and the use of revenues to improve local transport to me or to the National Assembly for Wales for approval. I am pleased to say that 25 local authorities have said that they are interested in road user charging or the workplace parking levy.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): What is the right hon. Gentleman's estimate of the charge that would need to be imposed by a local authority in, say, London or Manchester, to reduce traffic on the roads by 10 per cent.?

Mr. Prescott: The calculations have been done by the local authorities that have chosen to use the scheme, based on the consultation document. I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman, who produced the Green Paper on transport for the previous Administration, had arrived at the same conclusion—that greater priority should be given to public transport and the possibility of congestion charging. Perhaps he has a better idea as a result of his analysis, but I have asked local authorities to examine our consultative document. At least the right hon. Gentleman and I are at one, though in total disagreement with those on the Opposition Front Bench, who are opposed to congestion charging and the improvement of public transport.

Mr. Redwood *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Prescott: Clearly, the consensus has ended. We now know where the extreme position is held: on the Conservative Front Bench.

I shall deal now with our proposals for air traffic services, which are also controversial. Air traffic services are covered in part I.

Mr. Gill: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: I have made it clear that the hon. Gentleman has never made a sensible intervention. I have no intention of conceding to him. *[Interruption.]*

Part I provides powers to proceed with a public-private partnership for the National Air Traffic Services. The Civil Aviation Authority and NATS provide a world-class service, but there are three reasons why we believe that change is necessary.

First, the existing public sector framework is inadequate to deal with future growth. NATS is denied access by restrictive Treasury rules to new forms of financing to fund the £1.3 billion of investment required over the next 10 years.

Secondly, there is a clear conflict between the obligation to provide air services while regulating safety. The Bill addresses that as the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs recommended. Thirdly, project management of the new Swanwick and Prestwick centres has been poor, with five-year delays and a budget overrun of more than 50 per cent.

Under the PPP, NATS, which is already a private company but publicly owned, will be jointly owned by the Government, a strategic private sector partner, and its employees. It will not be unique. It will be designated to the private sector, like the air traffic control at many of our major airports—for example, at Belfast and Bristol, to name just two. There are 35 air traffic service providers in the UK, most of which are privately owned.

We have always made it clear that we saw a PPP as the solution for NATS, rather than the wholesale privatisation demanded by the Opposition. When my right hon. Friend

[Mr. Prescott]

the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) was the Minister for Transport, he stated on 11 June 1998:

"The Government believe that the level of investment and efficiency that we need in our National Air Traffic Services can best be achieved through a partnership between the public and private sectors."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 637W.]

That partnership will ensure that NATS is able to finance its future investment within a stable regulatory framework. I agree that that is somewhat different from the amendment before the House today.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): What rate of return is expected on the large sums that will have to be provided for the necessary capital projects?

Mr. Prescott: That has not yet been established, as bids must be made by companies interested in operating as a strategic partner. Let us be clear about one thing: whatever the rate of return, the price will be determined by the regulator—the CAA—which can already take into account a sensible rate of return, as in the case of the BAA. That is its obligation. There will be regulatory control, as there is in comparable industries.

Air traffic control is all about safety—

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he explain how the risk transfer will take place, with regard to the privatisation of NATS, and in particular, what will happen to the company's current debt of £300 million?

Mr. Prescott: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman asks such a question. When the Conservative party was in government, it was well practised in—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members should listen to what I am about to say. The debt can be treated in the way that I outlined in my reply to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin). We have made it clear that a mistake was made in the double calculation of debt. The return from the sale of the proportion of shares that we propose must take into account the level of debt, the level of income, and the price that is likely to be obtained. The company's debt will be transferred and paid over a longer period, which will be negotiated as part of the contract. *[Interruption.]* If hon. Members consider the price, it is a balance between debt and equity, and there is an assumption by the company about the income stream that can be achieved by that. Debt is only a small part of the proposal and it will be taken into account in the negotiations that will take place after the House has agreed the proposal.

Air traffic control is all about safety, which must be paramount. Hon Members rightly want to ensure that safety is maintained, and I am happy to assure the House that safety will continue to be the overriding priority. The company is—and will continue to be—regulated to a high standard of safety by the CAA.

Once the PPP is effected, the company will also be subject to a licence while ensuring that its service standards are maintained. The Secretary of State and the CAA will be able to take enforcement action if the licence conditions or statutory duties, including maintaining a safe service, appear at any time to be compromised. In the event of a severe breach of a licence, a comprehensive special administration regime will safeguard the delivery of those services.

The concern that the profit motive will undermine safety is not proven. At the moment, the CAA is the public regulatory body that regulates companies—be it the BAA or airports authorities—with clear profit motives. In those circumstances, the BAA and the airports authorities are controlling companies that have a profit motive but maintain a high standard of regulatory safety.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): It is important to register that if the CAA or the BAA want to expand, the BAA could offer more commercial opportunities in shops. Although NATS can offer management elsewhere, it is impossible for it to expand on a commercial basis in the way in which my right hon. Friend suggests. He is not comparing like with like.

Mr. Prescott: I agree. It is not proposed that NATS should be involved in the commercial operation of opening shops and creating extra income flows. We want to ensure that safety standards are maintained; that there is proper equipment and that the staff are properly trained. The CAA has established that. It has a safety function as well as a regulatory and economic function. The authorities have spelt out to the Transport Sub-Committee, which my hon. Friend chairs, the sort of checks and controls that they undertake. I believe that they meet the safety requirements. Safety regulation is safer than previously, because we adopted the Committee's recommendation.

The CAA's safety regulation group, which is relevant to the matters that we are discussing, will retain safety oversight of the 35 United Kingdom air traffic service providers, including NATS. The Bill will give the Government power to issue directions to NATS in the interests of national security. The licence conditions will also lay that down. We intend, through the PPP, to secure a long-term strategic partner, which will commit to investing in and delivering an air traffic control system for the next century. The new PPP company will have a proportion of directors appointed by the Government, with the Government holding a special golden share and having a separate partnership agreement with the strategic partner.

Those two instruments will protect the Government's interests in key areas such as the business principles of the company, the transfer, issue and disposal of shares and the completion and maintenance of major projects such as Swanwick and the new air traffic control centre at Prestwick. While I am on the subject of Swanwick, I can confirm that NATS expect the centre to meet its operational target date of winter 2001–02.

The new Scottish centre demonstrates our commitment not just to maintaining safety, but to enhancing it. That commitment also underlies our decision to proceed with a PPP.

Mr. Jenkin: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Can he explain the use of a golden share that he is obviously planning to get rid of?

Why does clause 49 make provision for him to waive the rights under the golden share? Indeed, there is a shortcut provision for him to

"amend or repeal this section"

of the Bill. If the golden share is so important, why is there a fast-track provision to enable him to rid of it?

Mr. Prescott: There is clear provision for fast-tracking on national security matters, but the golden share will define those conditions in which the directors acting on behalf of the Government will be able to intervene and uphold those conditions of national interest that we have laid down. That is not unusual. I believe that the previous Administration used the golden share in a similar way, and we have made it clear that that is how we will maintain control in the company. No doubt the hon. Gentleman will be able to press those points in Committee.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: No.

Under our proposals, the main strategic decisions of the NATS board will require a unanimous vote of all directors, including those who will be appointed by the Government. Moreover, by retaining a substantial shareholding we can ensure that the Exchequer—and hence the taxpayer—shares in the future profits of the company. That is an important point in respect of the priorities of public expenditure. Chancellors have many pressures on them to invest in education, health, pensions and all such areas. A special role can be played by those public sector industries with an income stream that can raise their own investment requirements instead of adding to the pressure on the Exchequer, and it is right for them to do so.

Mr. Portillo *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: I believe that that is a proper consideration to take into account regarding the priorities of public expenditure. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way!"] No, no.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe set out the Government's preferred option in July. Under those proposals, the Government will retain a 49 per cent. stake in NATS, while NATS staff will have a 5 per cent. share. A private sector strategic partner will take the remaining 46 per cent. We are having discussions with the parties concerned and will be reporting back to the House on the detailed conclusions. The House will have an opportunity to vote on the shareholding arrangements of the company, as about every decision on this matter. I can reassure the House that it will not be a rushed sale without the safeguards that we were used to seeing under the Conservative Government.

Finally, part IV relates to our proposals to improve the railways. The House has, of course, seen those provisions before and the Railways Bill, which I introduced to the House during the summer, has undergone scrutiny by the Transport Sub-Committee of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. In its report, the Committee said:

"We welcome the Railways Bill, which we believe is a practical way of addressing the problems of a restructured railway."

As ever, I am grateful to its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), and her Committee. As a result of the Committee's hard work, I believe that we have a better Bill that enjoys considerable consensus of agreement, both inside and outside the House, with the exception of the Opposition, who once again have adopted the more extreme position.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. On part IV, may I point out to him that many members of the passenger transport executives are deeply concerned about the present wording of clause 215? Their fear—which I believe is legitimate—is that their rights to set local railway services may be diminished by the Strategic Rail Authority. Will he look again at the serious complaint that they make?

Mr. Prescott: That is indeed a serious point and I am well aware of it. In this matter, although passenger transport authorities in Scotland and in England have some concerns, we shall be giving the grants to the Strategic Rail Authority and it will negotiate with the PTAs about the provision of services. I can assure my hon. Friend that we shall be giving the matter proper attention in Committee. We are well aware of the problem and members of the Committee will have a chance to examine that complaint.

The Bill establishes the Strategic Rail Authority and sets out its powers to improve services for rail users. The Conservative party planned for a static railway; its solution was to price passengers off the system, rather than invest for growth. Privatisation fragmented the industry into many pieces—*[Interruption.]* It is not in doubt that the railway system was fragmented into many pieces by privatisation, which created millionaires and millions of dissatisfied passengers as well a decline in performance and investment. The industry was subject to constraint by the limited franchises that the Conservative party imposed on it. Labour's priorities are exactly the opposite.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: We will promote and develop a growing, safer, better invested railway that is committed to delivering improved performance, quality and capacity.

Mr. Jenkin: Behind you.

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock).

Joan Ruddock: Will my right hon. Friend comment on the railway company Connex, which has today threatened that there will be no new year services for passengers in my constituency and elsewhere? Does he understand the fury of my constituents? That threat comes on the back of the company's practice of shutting out disabled

[Joan Ruddock]

passengers earlier this year, and running trains with so few carriages that there has been massive overcrowding. Three weeks ago, in an apparent attempt at virtual punctuality, it removed all the clocks at Lewisham station.

Mr. Prescott: That is a proper answer to those who make claims about the joys and successes of the privatised railway industry. The Strategic Rail Authority will be able to deal with such matters and with the renegotiation of franchises, which will improve services. It will have powers to enforce the franchisees to deliver what they have promised. As I understand it, that railway company suffered a fine of £1.4 million. Under the Bill, that money will not go to the Treasury: such fines will be reinvested in the railways. That is an obvious improvement.

The Strategic Rail Authority will put railways at the centre of an integrated transport system, with proper public accountability and investment, putting the passenger's interest at the top of the agenda in a long-term strategic framework with the focus on a plan for growth.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): The Secretary of State rightly proposes a large investment in the railway infrastructure. What plans does he have for any stake to be taken in Railtrack by the public sector, so that we can guarantee that the money invested by the public does not end up in the pockets of the shareholders of Railtrack or train operating companies?

Mr. Prescott: I understand my hon. Friend's point, but the money that was given by the previous Administration under the negotiations for the franchises was a form of revenue support for the companies to maintain the price structure forced on them by the Railtrack agreement. That is a matter of some concern. I have instructed the Strategic Rail Authority and the regulator to consider this matter in the further agreements with Railtrack and the rolling stock companies. We do not envisage taking any share in Railtrack. I am not sure that many people would want to do that at the moment, and I am not convinced that there is a case for the Government to do so.

I am glad that the shadow Strategic Rail Authority has already set to work on strategic planning with such good effect. In his articles, the right hon. Member for Wokingham complained about the rail franchises. It was the Conservative Government who negotiated rail franchises that were limited to seven years and which, according to the companies, stunted investment. That is their complaint and why they agreed to renegotiate the franchises.

Mr. Redwood: They should get on with it.

Mr. Prescott: They are getting on with it, although the right hon. Gentleman does not seem to be aware of that. They have seven-year contracts, and I agreed that we should start early negotiations. The Strategic Rail Authority is doing that, but the right hon. Gentleman will apparently vote against that body.

Renegotiating the franchises will create greater commitment to quality and investment over a longer period. The Strategic Rail Authority will take over consumer protection functions from the rail regulator. The Strategic Rail Authority and rail regulator will have enhanced powers to deal with poor performing companies.

The rail regulator, confirming his role as an economic regulator, will have a new power to require facility owners, such as Railtrack, to enhance facilities or to provide new facilities. The rail regulator will work to facilitate the SRA's strategic approach, balanced against his other duties.

As I said, the SRA will retain the penalty income from enforcement action, including enforcement by the rail regulator. Penalties will be kept for investment in the railway, and not returned to the Treasury.

We have also responded to the Select Committee's other concerns. We have given the SRA wider powers to encourage rail freight, we have ensured greater transparency and accountability and we were happy to include in the Bill the other recommendations made by the Transport Sub-Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich.

During the Second Reading of last Session's Railways Bill, I undertook to return to the issue of the borrowing powers available to the SRA—I think the matter was raised by the right hon. Member for Wokingham. The SRA's borrowing limit is that of the British Railways Board which it replaces and is to be set at £3 billion, part of which will be swallowed up by the board's existing debt of half a billion pounds.

We are now providing the necessary flexibility for the SRA to accommodate the outcome of the current negotiations on franchise replacement. The existence of a £3 billion borrowing limit does not mean that the SRA will need to borrow £3 billion or any other amount. We should not anticipate the results of the negotiations.

The measures in the Bill bring public accountability back to the railway industry. It will allow the SRA to plan for an expanding network. It will require those who own the network to meet their obligations and fulfil their promises, and it will require train operators to fulfil their franchise agreements. It will return the concept of "public" to the concept of a public rail service.

The railway industry has been subject to plenty of criticism, much of it deserved, but there are now positive signs of a revival of Britain's railways. Figures for performance and for signals passed at danger are encouraging, although we still have a long way to go. The Strategic Rail Authority will be the new guardian of the public interest: it will plug the loopholes in the last Government's rail legislation, and will provide tougher enforcement to protect the passenger.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): Should not the authority be obliged to listen carefully to what is said by the Welsh Assembly about the needs and priorities of services in Wales? What mechanisms will the Secretary of State introduce to ensure that it does so?

Mr. Prescott: I believe strongly in consultation between the Welsh Assembly and the SRA. Indeed, I am currently considering a proposal that the authority should include a member representing the Welsh interest.

We have further enhanced the powers of the passengers' representatives, now renamed rail passengers' committees, by providing a statutory basis for their work

on bus-rail links, interchanges and new integration. Given those new powers, it is no wonder that the rail passenger watchdog has described the Bill and the SRA as

"the best Christmas present passengers could have".

The Bill will help to provide a quality integrated transport system for the 21st century. It gives us the means to rebuild our transport industries, to reduce congestion, to improve the environment and to provide a transport system that is good for people, whether they are motorists, bus or rail passengers or, indeed, pedestrians. Despite the transport mess and the decline in quality over the 18 years that we inherited we have, in just two and a half years, begun to turn the corner. There are more passengers on trains; more goods are carried on the railways; there are more bus passengers, reversing the decline; there is cleaner air in our cities; and there are record levels of investment. All that is within a longer-term framework. The Bill takes a further step towards the establishment of a modern, integrated, properly financed and properly regulated transport system to rival the best in Europe.

4.12 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I have declared my interests in the Register of Members' Interests, including the fact that my wife works for British Airways. However, I speak not on behalf of those interests, but on behalf of the many hard-pressed travellers who will be given a rotten deal by the Bill, and on behalf of the overtaxed motorists who will be taxed again and again if the Bill is passed unamended.

It is a pleasure to see the Deputy Prime Minister attending a transport debate again. I have read many obituaries of him as Transport Minister over the past week and I have seen the briefings. We now know, notwithstanding the briefing that he gave after our last transport debate, that he had lost at No. 10. Much of his power and responsibility has now been transferred to a Minister in the other place. It is great to have the right hon. Gentleman back with us, singing his swan song. We all remember some of the great refrains: I particularly enjoyed the little passage about the static railway. There could hardly be a better phrase to sum up all that the right hon. Gentleman has done for the railway industry so far.

We are about to see a vision of Labour's future transport policy, before the Bill has even been passed by the House. I ask hon. Members to think forward to millennium night in our great capital city. We are told that we will not be allowed to drive into London and that many central London streets will be closed. We are told that we will not be allowed to take a car to the Dome or anywhere near it, on pain of being fined for daring to do so.

We are then told that if we nevertheless manage to get into the centre in time for some of the celebrations, 24 tube stations will be closed in the busiest places to make it as difficult as possible for us to get home. In the meantime, Westminster tube station, which will be closed to everyone else, will be open so that members of the Cabinet can take a special ride to the Dome on the Jubilee line. That is not travel for the people, it is travel for the privileged few. It is like Moscow in 1960, not London in 2000. Ministers should be ashamed of themselves because they are closing public transport when the public want to use it and they are stopping people using their cars.

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): Two weeks ago, after the right hon. Gentleman's last abject performance in the House, his excuse was that he was suffering from flu. Does he have a similar excuse prepared for today's debacle?

Mr. Redwood: Labour Members do not like it when I am scoring, and they know I am scoring. They know that, on the previous occasion, the Deputy Prime Minister overspun his alleged success and was sacked three days later. If, every time I bring a Minister to the Dispatch Box, he gets sacked three days later, I will regard that as a success, given the dreadful Ministers and the dreadful policies that are brought before us.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) wishes to remind us of that Opposition day debate, when I asked 10 crucial questions but received no answers. Again, today, we have had no answers from the Deputy Prime Minister. We now know, of course, that we have to go to another place to ask the true Transport Minister for some of the answers.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I wish to deal with the point about the previous debate and then I will give way to the hon. Lady. I remember that she was very patient on that occasion. I will not make her wait quite so long this time.

To come to a judgment about the Bill, we need to know the answer to many important questions about the Government's plans for our transport system. When will there be a tube public-private partnership? How much more delay will there be? How much cash does the Secretary of State have for the tube over the next two years? We were told last Wednesday that he had zero in the budget for next year and zero in the budget for the year after. Is it still zero? Nothing will come of nothing—he has been filleted by the Treasury.

Is the Secretary of State able to offer any new tube lines, in the way that we can with our Londoners tube scheme? When will he come to a decision on Railtrack payments? It has put a sensible proposal to him, which will enable it to get on with the job of increasing capacity. He and the new Minister for Transport have been unable to come to a decision.

When will the Secretary of State extend the franchises of the train operating companies? They are claiming, rightly, that his delay and the indecision of the new Transport Minister in the other place are stopping them getting on with the level of investment that they would like to make.

When will the right hon. Gentleman have something positive to say about proper car parks at stations? When will he rule out 550,000 houses on the green fields of the south-east, which would make a mockery of any attempt to control the congestion problem? When will he announce policies to improve access to stations, rather than trying to stop people driving into towns, where most stations happen to be? When will he announce new road

[Mr. Redwood]

schemes in the trunk road programme? When will he admit that trying to privatise National Air Traffic Services on the cheap is a very foolish policy?

Those are 10 important questions. I will ask them again and again until we start to drag some answers out of this miserable Secretary of State and the new Minister in the other place, who has taken most of his job away from the right hon. Gentleman.

Ms Ward: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I will give way; I did offer to do so.

Ms Ward: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for remembering my persistence during the last debate and for giving way so easily this time.

As we are on the subject of repeating questions, perhaps I can repeat my question from last time: why is the right hon. Gentleman so opposed to the Strategic Rail Authority when it will provide the protection that passengers need and ensure that, where fines are levied, they go back into investing in that important service?

Mr. Redwood: We think that the authority is a cop-out by the Secretary of State and the new Minister for Transport. They should make many of those decisions and regulators exist to deal with the regulatory issues. The authority is a great red herring. It involves delay, but we need Ministers to make some decisions now so that the railway industry can get on and invest. We do not need a year of delay, the setting up of a new body and then some decisions from people who have been chosen by the Minister for Transport, or perhaps on the advice of the Secretary of State if he is back in favour by then. They will be people whom he wishes to control and who are unnecessary intermediaries in the process of the Government making some decisions and the railway industry investing.

Mr. Prescott: Apparently, the right hon. Gentleman is not aware that renegotiations are handled by the franchising director. Ministers did not do that even under the right hon. Gentleman's legislation, but he does not appear to be aware of that.

Mr. Redwood: Of course I am aware of that. However, as I said, we do not need more regulators; we need the Government to make some decisions and to give strategic direction. Everyone in the industry knows that the Deputy Prime Minister and the new Transport Minister are failing to give the necessary direction, which is why we are seeking it.

This morning, I turned on my radio to listen to the "Today" programme and I felt sorry for the Government when, sure enough, just after 8 o'clock the prime slot was about transport. Although I was very pleased to note that the day's big issue in Parliament was being picked up by the BBC's flagship morning news programme, what did I hear? I heard not the Deputy Prime Minister—of course not—but the true Minister for Transport, the man whom No. 10 Downing street trusts. And what did I hear him saying? I heard him wriggling every which way, trying to change the rhetoric and the words of the Deputy Prime Minister. Above all, I heard absolutely nothing about the Transport Bill.

Today, the House is considering a non-Bill from a non-Minister who is being airbrushed out of the script. Although a Minister appeared on the "Today" programme, he did not mention the Transport Bill, which is being debated today on the Floor of the House. I can quite understand why the Minister did not mention the Transport Bill: it will make matters worse and it is an embarrassment. The Bill will tax people off the road and clog up the railways with more regulation. There will be no decisions. The Bill also sells National Air Traffic Services on the cheap.

In his speech, the Deputy Prime Minister struggled over the NATS issue. I was therefore pleased to see that 50 Labour Members have today had the courage of the convictions of the whole Labour party before the general election and tabled a reasoned amendment on the sale of NATS. Opposition Members look forward to a lively debate among Labour Members on that particular problem.

Mr. Prescott: There will not be any debate among Tory Members.

Mr. Redwood: As the Deputy Prime Minister should well know, Conservative Members do not disagree about NATS. We know exactly what we should like to do with NATS, and it would not be what the Government want to do with it.

We remember only too clearly a senior Labour spokesman saying before the general election that our air would not be for sale under a Labour Government. Two and a half years later, we have the effrontery of Ministers presenting to both Houses of Parliament proposals to sell it on the cheap.

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if his preferred option of full-scale privatisation were to proceed, there would be no new Scottish centre at Prestwick?

Mr. Redwood: That is a false assumption. We would not sell NATS on the cheap. If we were to proceed, we would wish to protect all the important interests, including safety.

The Deputy Prime Minister is in a terrible muddle over the sale proceeds from NATS. The Bill's financial memorandum states not only that the gross proceeds will be £350 million, but that NATS has outstanding loans of about £300 million, which will have to be settled either by refinancing, repayment or writing off. If we write off £300 million, but raise only £350 million from the sale—and if the costs amount to £35 million, as we are told they will—we would be selling off NATS for £15 million net.

When I first pointed out the position, the spin from the Department was that it would not write off £300 million at the taxpayers' expense, despite the very clear language of its memorandum, which it has still not amended. Is the Deputy Prime Minister therefore saying that clause 55 is redundant? That clause strengthens the impression given by the financial memorandum because it gives him the power to write off that debt. Presumably, he seeks that power because he thinks that he may need to use it,

in which case he will be selling NATS at the devastatingly cheap price of £15 million net—*[Interruption.]* Labour Members say that that is ridiculous. It is entirely ridiculous, but it is what the documents say. The Deputy Prime Minister has been unable to clear up the uncertainty.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Is the right hon. Gentleman the same person who, as a Minister in the previous Government, authorised the selling off of British Rail and the extinguishing of a debt of £19,000 million? British Rail was sold for a fraction of its true worth.

Mr. Redwood: I was not the Minister who signed off anything on the sale of British Rail. The hon. Gentleman was quite right in thinking that I was not the Minister. Perhaps he should cross-examine those on his own Front Bench. It is deeply embarrassing because they are unable to explain the numbers. The fact that they are all remaining seated displays that they cannot do so. They have a great problem.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Gentleman knows that, in a letter to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), we explained precisely the mistake that we believe the Conservatives are making. First, their judgment about the £350 million figure is based on present circumstances, not on any judgment by a company that wants to buy. Such a company would take into account debt and equity as well as the income stream that would have to be determined by the prices to be charged. It is nonsense to say that £350 million would be the price. One cannot make that judgment until someone makes a bid.

As for debt, it can be structured over a longer period, as the right hon. Gentleman himself has already said. Such decisions will be taken during the progress of negotiation as we choose a strategic partner in this matter. Only then can we come to a proper judgment, although the Committee will, of course, be able to debate the matter.

Mr. Redwood: I am relieved to hear that the Deputy Prime Minister wants to walk away from the clear statement made to the House in the paper tabled on the financial and manpower effects of the Bill. The mistake is not mine, but the Government's. I did not invent the figures, I simply read out what the Government had produced. They say that they will receive only around £350 million. They leave open the possibility—that puts it at its lowest, although I believe that clause 55 states it explicitly—that they will have to pay off £300 million of debt into the bargain. I urge the Deputy Prime Minister to tear up those figures, to recognise that the assets are much more valuable, and to sell them differently and for a sensible price. On the available figures and information, our charge stands that the Government's original intention was to sell those assets on the cheap for a net £15 million.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) has said, there is also considerable vagueness over the golden share. The right hon. Gentleman seems quite unclear about what the Bill says. It makes it crystal clear that the golden share, which we thought had been included to protect some of the British taxpayers' interests, can be overridden at the Secretary of State's request without the proper protections that we shall demand.

Clauses 92 to 138 tackle the issue of buses. We object most strongly to the wish of the Secretary of State and the Minister for Transport to bring back the monopolist to the bus industry. The kernel of the proposals would, in given areas, enable quality contracts to lock out competitors for up to 10 years. Competition is best for the traveller and the passenger, so we shall fight that proposal tooth and nail. In addition, it may not be permissible under European law, and we look forward to exploring that issue.

Mr. Corbyn: Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that during the 10 years after the Tories deregulated bus services outside London, there was a consistent fall in passenger usage? Meanwhile, in London—the one place where bus regulation was maintained—there was a consistent increase in bus usage. Is that not the answer to the problem?

Mr. Redwood: I remember deregulation of the buses producing a lot of new services and retaining passengers who would otherwise have been lost. It is true that during the Conservative years people became a great deal more prosperous and many of them decided to buy and use cars. We see nothing wrong in that even if the Government, speaking with one of their voices, have trouble with that idea.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I know that the right hon. Gentleman studies very closely the reports of the Transport Sub-Committee, which I Chair, and I am exceedingly grateful to him. He will therefore acknowledge that the evidence that we received on areas in which privatised bus companies operated revealed the astonishing fact that, somehow, very few of them managed to compete with one another in the same places. As we looked at the map appended to our report, we might almost have thought that the companies did not want any real competition among themselves.

Mr. Redwood: That is not a good argument for trying to prevent competition by legislating for lock-outs of the kind envisaged in the Bill. *[Interruption.]* Ministers may suggest that I am shifting my ground, but that is not so. There are good examples of areas in which competition worked extremely well before Labour councils caught up and wrecked it. In Oxford, for example, there was tremendous bus competition until a Labour council arrived recently and tried to stop buses moving around the streets, as well as cars. That has begun to undermine the good work that deregulation undoubtedly did.

In my local area, the Liberal Democrat opposition were all ready to run a strong campaign against bus deregulation. Then someone kindly sent us one of their memos, which said "Don't bother with running this campaign, because unfortunately there are more buses around since deregulation, and such a campaign would backfire." At least they were sensible, unlike the Labour party on this occasion.

One of the Government's big problems is that they cannot make up their mind whether to make a U-turn. I have already asked the Deputy Prime Minister whether he stands by the statement in which he said:

> "I will have failed if in five years time there are not far fewer journeys by car. It's a tall order but I urge you to hold me to it. I agree t keep that commitment. Judge my performance in five years."

[Mr. Redwood]

Meanwhile, the proper Minister for Transport—Lord Macdonald—is busily briefing everybody that there is no chance of car usage decreasing over a five-year period. Not only is he saying that more cars will be bought, but that, as a result of that and of what he wants to do—which is to make motoring cheaper—there will be more journeys by car. His latest statement on the "Today" programme this morning—the official Government view—was that the best that he could ever do would be to have the odd year of zero growth in car journeys, while most years would see some growth.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) *rose—*

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central) *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: I am still making an important point.

We need to know from the Government why the previous Transport Minister—now the retired one—still seems to believe that he can reduce the number of car journeys over a five-year period, bearing in mind that over the first two years of the Government's term in office they have gone up substantially, when the true Minister is clearly telling us that there is no chance of achieving that. Lord Macdonald said:

"You can either try to reduce traffic overall or you can say it's more rational to try to reduce the damaging output of traffic—pollution and congestion. We think that is more realistic."

He was clearly putting the boot into the Deputy Prime Minister's ambitions.

Mr. Foster: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Given his particular concern and interest in the issue, demonstrated by his persistent questioning, could he explain whether he and his party wish there to be fewer car journeys and whether the policies that he has expounded are likely to lead to that?

Mr. Redwood: We would like a wider range of options so that people can travel more easily. We fully accept that there needs to be a big improvement in rail, tube and bus travel, particularly at peak times, in congested areas. I reckon that as the country gets richer and people acquire more cars, there will be more car journeys. It is not an object of our policy physically to stop people using their cars, or to tax them off the road. We wish to provide them with better choices because we believe, particularly at busy times of day and in busy areas, that the car is not always the best answer. However, the public transport option needs a lot of investment to make it that much better.

Mr. Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that lowering or increasing speed limits, lowering the price of petrol, getting rid of speed humps and building more roads will lead to more traffic and congestion? How can he criticise the Secretary of State on those grounds?

Mr. Redwood: We want people to be able to travel more easily. There will be times when it is better to travel by bus, train or tube, but that will require massive investment. Nor should we deliberately go out of our way to make the congestion worse, as the Government have been doing up to now by trying to force people off the roads, restricting the capacity of the existing road network to no good effect.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend read *The Daily Telegraph* on Saturday, in which the new Transport Minister—in complete contrast to the views of his predecessor, as he explained—said that it was inevitable that the number of cars in Britain keeps rising. As an amusing aside, Lord Macdonald also said:

"There were elements of the market philosophy and privatisation that seemed to me to make economic sense".

Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is not what the Deputy Prime Minister believes?

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend has put his finger on the controversy raging at the heart of Government. We all know that Lord Macdonald is more likely to win because he has the backing of No. 10, while the Deputy Prime Minister does not.

We also know that the Bill will continue the same old bash-the-motorist policies—which brings me to clauses 139 to 153, which deal with congestion taxes, and clauses 154 to 173, which deal with parking taxes. We need to know—at the winding-up of the debate or in Committee—how much tax will be required to make an impact. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) made an excellent intervention on that point, but was unable to get an answer from the Deputy Prime Minister.

Experts have suggested that it would take a charge of at least £10 a day to make any visible impact on the number of cars entering a main city such as London or Manchester. How much do the Government suggest local authorities might impose and when do they suggest the charges should be introduced? Has the Deputy Prime Minister read the reports stating that the technology is not yet ready for the introduction of sensible road charging? Presumably, we cannot have toll booths at every road that goes into a main city. When does he think that the technology will be sufficiently workable to introduce those charges? How much does he think a council will want to charge?

It has been suggested that the parking tax could be as much as £3,000 a space in central London and several hundred pounds in other major towns and cities. *[Interruption.]* Is that a realistic assessment? How much does the Deputy Prime Minister think should be imposed? Would he accept any cap or limit on what could be enormous charges? When does he think that the charges should and could be introduced?

The right hon. Gentleman proposes to tax people who drive into towns to catch a train or to pick up heavy loads from shops or from their place of business. He proposes to tax people who drive to the office and park during the day because they intend to work late, when public transport will have ceased to provide a decent service.

Mr. Prescott: I am not proposing anything.

Mr. Redwood: The Deputy Prime Minister now says that the legislation is a work of fiction and that he is not proposing anything. If he cares to look at the measures that he is proposing, he will see clause after clause giving

local authorities the power to impose those swingeing taxes. Why is he introducing the measure if he does not want local authorities to do that? Of course he wants them to impose those taxes on the motorist—but his cowardice is such that he would prefer someone else to take the immediate flak for doing so. However, he will get the flak because the taxes are his wish and are in his legislation.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify whether he is now repudiating the policies in the 1994 Tory manifesto, which advocated congestion charging, and the policies of his erstwhile colleague, Mr. Norris, who supported such charges in 1999? Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he said that if private enterprise were given its head, it would build more toll roads and would get Britain on the move? Is not that also taxing the motorist? Does he repudiate his own views?

Mr. Redwood: That was an extremely feeble intervention. I am making it crystal clear that the Conservative party is against these new taxes on the motorist. We are against congestion charges for the use of the existing road system. We are against parking taxes for the use of existing parking places. The hon. Lady will find that we shall vote against those and the rest of the Bill this evening, and that we shall oppose the measures vigorously in Committee.

The Deputy Prime Minister, as a defence for all these extra taxes that he has invented, says that he has succeeded in securing hypothecation. He seems to have bought a pig in a poke from the Treasury. If the taxes go through, how do we know that there will be any extra money when he has not secured base budgets for the money that the Treasury already collects from the motorist? Does he not realise that the Treasury collects more than £32,000 million from the motorist and that only about one fifth of that is spent on transport improvements and on the transport system? Most of the motorists' money is taken for other uses. If he does not secure big and sensible base budgets, his hypothecation is absolutely worthless. The Treasury will take away what the Deputy Prime Minister is taking from the motorist. He is not Mr. Hypothecation—he is Mr. Gullible. He has bought this pig in a poke from the Treasury. He really believes that there will be extra money, whereas the Treasury will use the excuse of the extra money from the higher taxes to take away some of the other money that would have gone to the transport sector.

On the issue of the fuel escalator, Ministers are trying to look both ways at the same time. We are told that they will scrap the fuel escalator, which they raised well after the time that it should have been scrapped—*[Interruption.]* The Government increased the fuel escalator when fuel taxes were already high. They made those taxes ruinously high.

We now hear from the Government that they may possibly scrap the fuel escalator, and that the main source of new money to sort out transport problems will be increases in fuel duties above the rate of inflation. *[Interruption.]* The Government cannot have it both ways—we all know on which side they will come down. They will tax the motorist more. They may hypothecate that revenue, but then they will mug the motorist by taking away money that the Government would otherwise have put into the transport system.

Mr. Paterson: From a sedentary position, the Deputy Prime Minister, chuntering away, said "Perhaps" with reference to the fuel escalator. Table B9 in the pre-Budget report clearly shows fuel duties increasing from £21.6 billion to an amazing £23.5 billion.

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend has a bull's eye again. That is why I predicted that the Government will come down on the side of taxing the motorist. They always do. What does Labour do best? Taxing the motorist—that is what they are there for and that is what they like doing.

Finally, I shall discuss the part of the Bill dealing with the railway industry.

Mr. Don Foster: Only a few minutes ago, the right hon. Gentleman told the House that he was not in favour of proposals for road traffic reduction. Will he acknowledge that that is a personal U-turn on his part, and that on 29 May 1997 he wrote to a Mr. Keabie in Reading offering to support road traffic reduction proposals?

Mr. Redwood: I have set out very clearly Her Majesty's Opposition's policy. We believe that we need to promote more public transport, which is what I was saying then and what I am still saying today. Rumours of my inconsistency have been greatly exaggerated.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: No. I shall now move on to discuss the railways. The hon. Gentleman has had one little shot, which went wrong; he will have to make do with that.

The Bill gives the impression that a new regulator will sort out the railways, when what we need is someone to sort out the money for the railways. The Deputy Prime Minister savages Railtrack at every opportunity and he has now taken away its opportunity to bid for the tube, having originally encouraged it to do so, wasting £20 million of its money in the process. We have a smooth-talking Minister in the other place who does not seem to think that Railtrack is guilty of all the sins of the railways. I trust that he wins this argument because he is closer to the truth, and his may be a better approach to adopt to improve the railway industry.

What we especially dislike about the part of the Bill dealing with the railways is the fact that the Strategic Rail Authority will be a pawn in the hands of the Transport Minister, the Secretary of State or his successor. It is given all sorts of grant powers, but we do not know—and still have not been told by the Deputy Prime Minister—whether it will have any money to spend on those grant powers to enable it to do any good. We do not know how the very wide-ranging powers will be used. We shall need to probe in Committee the type of guidance and guidelines that will be offered.

We know that the train operating companies are rightly complaining about the uncertainty that the clauses are causing, and we know that Railtrack has a rotten deal—one which does not encourage increases in capacity—which needs sorting out. The Government are performing

[Mr. Redwood]

a U-turn in their words but not in their deeds. If there was a U-turn in reality, there would be an end to higher fuel taxes; more roads would be built; there would be more investment in the tube and railways; and, above all, the Government would scrap the Bill.

The Bill bashes the motorist. It threatens the motorist with more congestion and parking taxes; it gives powers to sell NATS on the cheap; and it shows that Ministers have not a clue about how much they might get for NATS, so great is the muddle and confusion. In addition, the Bill threatens to overwhelm the railway industry with Government interference.

This is a Secretary of State with two jags, half a job and no money. This is a Department making the traveller pay dearly for its failure with the Treasury. This is a Secretary of State on the wrong track, introducing the wrong Bill, at the wrong time, while he is undermined from above and below. We will oppose it tooth and nail, with vigour.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that Madam Speaker has placed a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, which applies from now.

4.44 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): In the small islands that constitute the United Kingdom, for nearly 20 years we have operated without any clear, coherent or organised plan for transport. It seems incredible that we are entering the new century with the first really useful Transport Bill that the House has been offered for many years. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions is the first person to plan coherently to initiate a modern and responsive system, and a system of transport that will respond to the needs of our economy, of our people and certainly of our future. That has not been done for so long that I think that he can almost take credit for being a truly unique, sensitive and intelligent Secretary of State.

Mr. Prescott: I know what is coming next.

Mrs. Dunwoody: May I just tell my right hon. Friend that in 1840 George Stephenson—not my talented hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) who sits on the Transport Sub-Committee but an equally talented Mr. George Stephenson—wrote to the Board of Trade complaining that, unless legislation was introduced to control safety in the railway industry, its reputation would suffer with the general public? They regarded the fatalities to passengers that resulted from broken rails, fallen bridges and from other disastrous pieces of masonry flying around the system as a real deterrent to travelling by rail.

This is the first Bill for some time to understand that, unless we are able to plan our transport system, passengers will decide where it will go. The problem will not just simply be that they will take their money and their goods elsewhere, but the economy will not be able to function efficiently. That is why the Bill is fundamental. It deals with many of the difficulties that were politically and pointlessly created by the Conservative Government.

The railway system is in the most frightful muddle; that is the truth of the matter. Recent terrifying accidents were only a demonstration of that lack of clarity and lack of coherence. The Strategic Rail Authority is not only necessary; it is essential. Without an attempt to put together this kaleidoscope of broken pieces, the railway industry in the next century will be totally unable to serve the needs of the United Kingdom.

Inside the railway industry at present there is not only a split of responsibilities across the system, but there is evidence that people are not clear about their own role. The Health and Safety Executive has said that, in some instances, working practices are dangerous and that some problems have arisen from the fact that the companies themselves were not clear what they expected people to do. In some cases, it is only too obvious that, because of the practice of contracting and sub-contracting jobs right the way down the system, people believed that, once a safety notice had been issued, that was the extent of their involvement. They did not monitor the work of those employed to do the job and they did not produce the high standard of safety that passengers have a right to expect. The Strategic Rail Authority is desperately needed.

It is a pity that we have had to wait two and a half years for this opportunity to legislate on transport, although I understand the political reasons for that. However, when we consider the size and shape of the Bill, one realises how much must be achieved in such a short time and why so many things have been thrust into the large basket of transport problems.

The Health and Safety Executive will need not only extra powers, but will need to be considered in a slightly different way. For example, at present, it is not even able to compare like with like. It does not have the safety standards that applied beforehand, when the old British Railways Board had responsibility for considering the licensing of particular equipment but not for ensuring that it worked efficiently or was solving the problems that arose.

There have been problems with the role of the rail regulator. I hope that during the proceedings on the Bill, the Secretary of State will spell out the relationship between the rail regulator and the Strategic Rail Authority. It would be unfortunate if clashes were to occur. They might give the impression that the rail regulator were prepared, on occasion, to talk up the situation, but when it came to making difficult decisions or, if I may use a colloquial phrase, putting the boot in, he ran away because he was influenced by political considerations, imposed not by the Government but by others in the railway industry.

When we talk about integrating transport we shall have to consider the role of the passenger transport authorities and their ability to plan in conjunction with the main rail system not only to provide good systems within their local areas, but to work out how they can integrate planning for roads and the provision of high-quality park and ride schemes. They will also be involved in other basic forms of planning that will enable increasing numbers of the public to move on to the rail system and encourage them not to use their motor car.

Some of the arguments that we have heard this afternoon are so artificial that they require no refutation. However, while there is not an efficient public transport system, people will hang on to their car, sometimes

because they have to and sometimes because it is more comfortable to do so. The provision by local authorities of alternative means of transport will be fundamental in changing that situation. That is why the ability in the Bill to introduce hypothecation is a tremendous advance.

In some countries there has been a clear acceptance of the fact that motorists will give up their four little wheels only when they are equally comfortable using other transport. For example, Scandinavian countries not only accept such planning, but positively encourage it. The city authorities in San Francisco were able, without any feeling that they were making a political decision, to raise the cost of bringing motor cars into the city and lower the cost of travelling on public transport. The response was clear and produced a shift of people from their car to the public railway system. Such planning and imagination will change the situation in the coming century, and it is to be warmly welcomed and encouraged.

I want to say a little about National Air Traffic Services. I can tell the Secretary of State that the Committee did a lot of detailed work on the railway aspects of the Bill, but we also considered aviation safety and are continuing to look at the public-private partnership for NATS. I know that my right hon. Friend will take seriously those findings and I know that he finds it helpful to have us doing the detailed work. However, I should like, for a moment, to speak in a personal capacity, not as the Chairman of the Committee.

I am totally opposed to the sale of NATS, and that will not come as any great surprise to my colleagues, who have heard me hold forth on the subject before. There is a kind of logic—it is not acceptable to me—in suggesting that we should sell the whole of NATS, which I understand is the present Conservative party position. That sale would be advised not because of concerns about safety but presumably because of a belief that if a body like Railtrack were created for air services, that would in some obscure way benefit the passenger. We know very well that such a measure would only bring in money from a sale; that body would not be concerned with safety or aviation planning.

However, there are difficulties with the suggestion that, somehow, the deal that is being proposed will be suitably protective of the interests of the customer, because there will be, first, a golden share and, secondly, an agreement that safety is to be regulated. I do not believe that that is so.

Unlike the other organisations that we have discussed and the BAA, which owns bricks and mortar and shops and can presumably charge more rent or increase its business elsewhere, NATS is very limited and controlled. Its business—to put it in its simplest form—is to keep planes apart in the air. In order to do that, its operators are extremely well trained, work under tremendous stress and believe that safety is their very first priority.

NATS has every year seen an increase—greater than in any other comparable industry—in aircraft movements. Its operators cope with that, and they do so reasonably cheerfully because they understand that it is not only their responsibility but one for which they are trained. They find it difficult to understand the Government's suggestion that NATS could be turned into a paying service and that they would be able to provide the same quality and assume the same responsibility for the traveller if they were employed by people who needed to make a profit for their shareholders. That is the fundamental difference. There would be a different attitude; we have seen it in other forms of transport.

I am afraid that the Government are not really matching like with like. I hope that they will very seriously reconsider their suggestion because it is not in the general interest and will not really offer improvements. Nor do I think that the suggestions for the protection of the public interest are sufficient to result in the level of care that we need.

Mr. Prescott *rose—*

Mrs. Dunwoody: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall not give way; I am very much up against time.

It does not help the debate to persist in saying that Exeter, Guernsey or Luton airports are comparable to London air traffic space. They are not. The arguments must be better thought out, better argued and, above all, fundamentally examined with great care by a Labour Government before they go down such a path.

The Secretary of State is the best Secretary of State that we have had for many years. He knows, understands and is totally committed to transport, and he will not be deflected by those in the press who are looking for any Aunt Sally in order to have a go at a Labour Government who appear to be coated in Teflon. More importantly, he should remember that he is a man of courage and integrity, and that those are the qualities that, above all, we look for in him and the future transport industry.

4.58 pm

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I listened with interest to the Deputy Prime Minister. I hope that he will understand what I mean when I say that I was strongly reminded of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus.

I recall the right hon. Gentleman's splenic outbursts during the rail privatisation process, so I could not resist a smile when he told us this afternoon that the National Air Traffic Services could be sold only for what the market would pay for it. He totally denied such a point in our discussions some years ago. I welcome the fact that he has put all that juvenile abuse and offence behind him, and that, to some degree, has cut himself off from the ideological baggage that is so reminiscent of old Labour and is now seeking to address what he and I would recognise as some of the real issues on the railway system. To the extent that the Transport Bill improves what we put in place, I welcome it.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Gentleman will recall our saying at the time that it would be foolish to privatise the railways just before the election, because the selling price would be affected—a complaint that has been echoed by Select Committees. The Administration responsible for the privatisation of British Telecom had the sense to wait until after the election. The Government responsible for the privatisation of the railways did not wait, and sold them for less than market value.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I call to mind the efforts made in the City by the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to talk down the price as much as they could.

[Sir Brian Mawhinney]

My first point relates to the background of funding and expenditure to which the Secretary of State drew attention when, with a degree of fanfare, he announced that he would muster £80 billion of expenditure, both public and private, to spend on this country's transport system over the next 10 years. I thought that a strange figure, so I asked the House of Commons Library for the figures for total Government expenditure on transport in the United Kingdom under the last Conservative Government. The answer was that, in 1996-97, total managed expenditure was £8.7 billion. For spending to be the same this year in real terms—that is, adjusted by the gross domestic product deflator—it would have to be £9.4 billion.

If spending were to remain at the same real level over the ensuing 10 years, it would total £105 billion at 2 per cent. inflation, £111 billion at 3 per cent. inflation, and £117 billion at 4 per cent. inflation. I wondered why the Secretary of State was so excited about that £80 billion of public and private money, given that if he simply maintained for the next 10 years the real value of Conservative spending, he would provide about £25 billion to £30 billion more. In the light of those figures, which were produced by the Library, not by some central office research assistant about which he might harbour certain—unjustified—suspicions, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us why he is robbing the country of between £25 billion and £30 billion of expenditure, both public and private, which would have been made if he had simply followed Conservative plans?

If the Secretary of State followed on from the latest estimate of expenditure in 1998-99, he would spend, in real terms, £98 billion at 2 per cent. inflation, £104 billion at 3 per cent. inflation and £110 billion at 4 per cent. inflation. Not only is the right hon. Gentleman robbing this country of £20 billion to £30 billion of expenditure that was already in place, but he is making a virtue of it. One of the values of a debate such as this is that we can draw attention to the fact that future expenditure is not as impressive as he and his spin doctors would have us believe.

Since franchising started, private rail companies have made about £2 billion of expenditure. We can add that to Railtrack's expenditure plans for the 10 years to which the Secretary of State has referred of £27 billion, assuming 30 per cent. growth. However, according to the chief executive of Railtrack, recently revised figures have increased expectations of growth to 50 per cent.; therefore, planned expenditure increases to £34 billion to £35 billion. Adding channel tunnel expenditure to that results in more than £40 billion of the £80 billion coming from the private sector, over which the Secretary of State exercises no control. I have not added in figures relating to the tube, to design, build, finance and operate road schemes, to ferries and docks or to aviation.

When all those are added in, the Secretary of State is making a song and dance about offering some £20 billion to £25 billion of public expenditure over the next 10 years. Had he followed our plans it would have been about £110 billion; had he followed his own, it would have been slightly more than £100 billion. Alastair Campbell has him dangling on the end of a string for about £25 billion to £30 billion of public expenditure. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said, even that is not from a solid base, so who knows what the Chancellor will actually give?

Mr. Prescott: Watch this space.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I assure the Secretary of State that if there is one space that we will watch, it is the rather large space that he occupies.

My second point concerns the regulation of aviation and rail transport. Clauses 200 and 201 give powers to the regulators to penalise train operators. There are no similar powers in respect of plane operators. Let me put this case to the Secretary of State. Two business men have businesses that compete for the same customers in Newcastle and want to go to London. They have a genuine choice: they can fly or go by train. Let us assume that the trains and the planes are equally late. The Bill means that the train operator can be fined a considerable sum for poor performance, but the plane operator cannot be similarly penalised.

As the Secretary of State would expect, I took advice about that situation. Fares would rise for the man who took the train because the train company would have to pass the bill on to the customer. I took advice about whether that made the Bill hybrid. I am told that in modern Britain, as we head to the 21st century, the view of hybridity means that it is a trains issue or a planes issue, rather than a transport issue. There cannot be hybridity across different modes of transport, even if the Secretary of State puts them in the same Bill. I have to accept that advice, but I have some other advice. I advise Richard Branson, Michael Bishop, Bob Ayling and the chief executives of all the train operating companies that operate over long distances to seek early legal advice because I think that that aspect of this Bill will wind up in the courts.

My third point is about charging. I asked the Secretary of State what charge would have to be imposed to reduce traffic by 10 per cent. He did not know and nor do the local authorities. Let me tell him something else that he does not know. When I was Secretary of State, I asked a world authority that very question. I was told, "I'll get you an answer for a contract for $150,000, but my strong advice to you is to save your money because no one knows, except that the figure will be so high that it is politically impossible to implement." We must understand that the Bill is not about congestion but taxation. Until the Secretary of State can tell the House how much effect different charges will have in reducing congestion, this will remain a taxation Bill.

The Secretary of State did not tell us how much it will cost to administer the scheme with all its exemptions, such as those for the elderly and the sick, for people on public service, and for doctors and health visitors. How much will it all cost? He does not know, nor do the local authorities. That also shows that the Bill is simply a taxation measure.

I put another question to the right hon. Gentleman. What effect will road charging have on the value of properties on those roads, or the rental value of those properties? The Secretary of State does not know, nor do local authorities.

May I point out one last thing to the Secretary of State? The Bill will charge teachers for the car parking places at their schools. It will charge doctors and nurses for the car

parking places at their hospitals. It will cost charity workers, such as those at the Royal National Institute for the Blind, for the car parking spaces at their place in my constituency. [HON. MEMBERS: "It was your proposal."] It will cost business for the car parking places at factories. It will cost local authorities for the car parking places of their employees, and the cost will be passed on in council tax.

The Bill is a mishmash. It is not the answer to what the Secretary of State and I agree are real transport issues. If he is willing to amend the Bill in Committee to meet those issues, I for one will support him, but I will not hold my breath.

5.11 pm

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House, believing that government ownership and control of National Air Traffic Services (NATS) is necessary for national security, acknowledging that the United Kingdom air traffic control system is recognised internationally as the safest and most reliable in the world, and being concerned that the introduction of the private profit motive could jeopardise safety standards in the future, considers that the Transport Bill is not an acceptable measure because it contains provisions the purpose of which is to pave the way for the partial privatisation of NATS."

The amendment encapsulates the case against the partial privatisation of NATS.

I strongly support the thrust of my right hon. Friend's opening remarks about the way in which Labour is delivering on transport virtually across the board. It is true that we are getting investment up on the London tube, the railways and the buses, with consequent benefits. It should always be borne in mind that, although the tube and the railways are extremely important, many people live nowhere near a railway or underground station and some do not even live close to a bus service. That is why it is particularly good that we have managed to increase subsidies for bus services, so that more people are now taking the bus. That is an important advance, as my right hon. Friend reminded us. I was grateful for the opportunity to serve with him on these matters in an earlier period in the Parliament.

My right hon. Friend referred to the day—my recollection of it may be more vivid than his—on which we received the report of the comprehensive spending review in which the Chancellor announced that we intended to consult on the Government's preferred option. My right hon. Friend will remember well that it fell to me, as Minister for Transport, to provide the written answer from which he quoted, which made it clear that we were consulting on the principle, not just the practical implementation. Let me make it clear that I do not intend to break the convention that conversations between Ministers are private. I accepted collective responsibility for everything that happened in relation to aviation, including National Air Traffic Services, until I left the Administration.

There are three key categories in which we have a strong—indeed, overwhelming—argument against the proposed partial privatisation of NATS. They are: business, national security—possibly the most important category—and safety. The arguments for the latter were well presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who chairs the Transport Sub-Committee.

I shall make the business case briefly. Hon. Members may know that the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions launched an important document produced by Oxford Economic Forecasting, entitled, "The Contribution of the Aviation Industry to the UK Economy". The aviation industry has made a huge contribution, including thousands of jobs. The shorthand document, which was released at the same time as the main document, and is supported by two Departments and sponsored by the industry, states that the aviation industry accounts for 180,000 direct airport jobs, 200,000 indirect jobs through the supply chain, 94,000 induced jobs, and 75,000 jobs in travel agencies. Some people—including, I suspect, some hon. Members—do not appreciate that the aviation sector is as big as the car manufacturing sector in terms of employment and business. Incidentally, I hope that the Government will grant the subsidy to the car manufacturing industry—it is especially important for Rover. But we are not considering a subsidy to the aviation industry.

Why are the Government not prepared to fund air traffic control in this country? It is argued that, from now on, we are not prepared to allow National Air Traffic Services to continue to borrow within the public sector. NATS runs at a profit, and we are simply asking the Government to allow it to continue to do that. We admit that perhaps £1 billion of investment will be required over the next 10 years, but the new tax that the previous Administration introduced on air passengers provides £700 million of income each year, and that figure will probably increase to £1 billion in two or three years' time, so people will find it difficult to understand that we are not prepared to continue to allow NATS to borrow in the public sector and run at a profit.

The argument that the privatisation proposal has been made in the interest of obtaining a capital receipt is the worst of financial or business arguments. When we consider debt and the proposed capital receipt, we must ask whether the Government are genuinely suggesting that NATS should be sold before Swanwick is operational, because if they are, the capital receipt will be very small. Swanwick will be a quantum advance in air traffic control in this country, and we must ensure that it is operational as soon as possible. Business supports that view, yet senior NATS officials are travelling around the country making the case for partial privatisation when they should be ensuring that everything has been done to enable Swanwick to come on stream on time. That is a great mistake. Even if I were in favour of privatisation—and I am totally opposed to it—I would still feel that this is the worst time at which to embark on it.

The argument for the second Scottish centre also relates to questions of business, safety and national security. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) has already raised the point. I remind my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who will remember it well, of the statement that he enabled me to make at Prestwick on 6 June 1997, when we clearly committed ourselves to the

[Dr. Gavin Strang]

two-centre strategy. That commitment was not conditional on the private finance initiative or some sort of partial privatisation. The press release said:

"Dr. Strang's decision confirms the two centre strategy for air traffic control in the UK, with the first centre being built at Swanwick in Hampshire. The New Scottish Centre will replace the existing Scottish Area Control Centre, whose air traffic control equipment is almost 20 years old, and will be run by National Air Traffic Services . . . a wholly owned subsidiary of the Civil Aviation Authority."

A note to the editor, which is worth quoting, states:

"In the early 1990s, NATS developed a long term plan for UK air traffic control. This has been reviewed in consultation with the industry and is known as the two centre strategy."

Yes, it was the previous Administration's strategy. The document continues:

"It is envisaged that all civil and military air traffic control operations will be concentrated at two sites—Swanwick in Hampshire and the New Scottish Centre at Prestwick, which would replace the existing centre there."

We have to be sure that there has been no change in Government policy on that.

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I can confirm that, as he well knows, our commitment to a two-centre strategy remains. That is not in doubt, but it is a matter of raising money: the resources raised from the private sector—from an income stream, for example for the underground—can amount to many billions of pounds. If we can secure the income for investment requirements from an income stream rather than putting pressure on the Exchequer, it is legitimate for us to make that argument in respect of expenditure on health, services and pensions.

On my right hon. Friend's final point in regard to growth in the industry, I want all those jobs to remain—and they will be returned, because this is a growth sector. There are 49 air traffic control centres in Eurocontrol, and it is estimated that the figure will be reduced to three or four in the next few years. I believe that under the proposed formula we can have something that we cannot have under a public sector formula—the opportunity to begin to expand in Europe and provide even more jobs and earnings.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That intervention was extremely long.

Dr. Strang: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I have only a quarter of an hour in which to speak. I say to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister that I am hopeful that we can continue the dialogue in relation to the two-centre strategy on military and civil grounds. That has nothing to do with privatisation, nothing to do with the private finance initiative and nothing to do with this so-called public-private partnership, to use the new jargon.

I shall move on to national security, which is the key issue; if anyone has any illusions about that I suggest that he or she dips into the Bill. Hon. Members will have noticed that more than half of it concerns aviation and NATS, although the provisions are very general. Clause 38(3) says:

"The Secretary of State may give to a licence holder a direction requiring it—

(a) to do or not to do a particular thing in connection with anything authorised by the licence, or

(b) to secure that a particular thing is done or not done in connection with anything authorised by the licence".

That refers to the provider of the air traffic control service, which will be NATS, and, whatever it is called, it will have a private strategic partner, which will run things on a commercial basis if the Government's declared policy goes ahead—although I am pleased that that is not specific in the Bill. The interesting point is that the clause continues:

"A person must not disclose, and is not required by any enactment or otherwise to disclose, a direction given or other thing done by virtue of this section if the Secretary of State notifies him that he thinks disclosure is against the interests of national security or the interests of the United Kingdom's relations with another country".

The Secretary of State takes powers to tell people who might be employed by a British or international company based wherever what to do; then he has to tell them not to tell anyone that he has told them what to do.

There are two important aspects to the security issue. The first is on-going and short-term and includes global terrorism, which fortunately is not a major factor at present. I do not want to be over-dramatic, but there undoubtedly could be circumstances in which we needed to seize control of the air traffic control system immediately if intelligence information was received about a bomb on a particular plane. The second aspect is on-going military-civil co-operation, at which we are the best in the world—not just better than France, which is what is often said. Day-to-day co-operation is so important, particularly as the civil aviation sector is growing, and must be handled properly. We in the UK are good at such co-operation, but after privatisation or partial privatisation there will be less incentive for the new private or semi-private company to co-operate fully with the intelligence services and the Ministry of Defence.

There is also the longer-term national security aspect—the issue of an international crisis: war may not have been declared but we may be in the run-up to a conflict. I am glad that national security issues have been addressed in the Bill, but the concerns cannot be adequately answered. Once the private set-up has been in control for a few years, we cannot be sure that it will respond as we would want to an immediate direction or request from the Secretary of State or his representatives. National security may well be the reason why the United States has not privatised its air traffic control services, and why the Conservative Government never did so despite the huge privatisation programmes under Lady Thatcher and her successor as Tory Prime Minister. The decisive case against privatisation is the national security case.

However, there are also safety issues. I shall comment on them fairly briefly, not least because my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, the Chair of the Transport Sub-Committee, has dealt with them fully. The Government's response to the Select Committee is not credible. It is not credible to argue that we are going down this road so as to enhance safety.

We need to retain NATS in public ownership in the longer term on security and safety grounds. It is vital that the House addresses this issue. I want the Bill to go into

Committee. We will move forward, and we will have a dialogue. I know that I am speaking for more than 50 Labour MPs when I make this case, and I hope that the Government will listen.

5.27 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), who rightly focused most of his comments on the part privatisation proposals for National Air Traffic Services. I shall return to that theme later.

There has been a great deal of puff in recent days and weeks about 10-year visions and the great future for transport. The House is glad finally to be tackling serious legislation on transport. As other hon. Members have said, this is the first Transport Bill this Parliament, and many would argue that it is long overdue.

The House faces a huge task in considering the Bill. It has four major sections, some of which the Liberal Democrats will support, although we believe that the Bill has pulled its punches in certain respects, and that the proposals for NATS are seriously misguided. For that reason, we shall vote against Second Reading.

Across the country—no matter which part of the United Kingdom we represent—everyone is conscious of transport problems. They are part of people's everyday lives, whether they are stuck in traffic jams, sitting in clapped-out rail carriages, waiting for buses or connections or hanging around at airports. The problems of congestion, crumbling or failed infrastructure, inadequate services and lack of integration face every transport user every day, whether they use public or private transport.

Ultimately, the reason for many of the problems facing people on Britain's road, rail and air system is that there is too little choice. We recognise and welcome the fact that the Government are trying to redress the balance and to begin to tackle some of these important issues.

The Bill introduces local transport plans and gives them a statutory basis. We welcome the principle enshrined in the Bill. We think it will be a useful tool to tackle congestion, poor service provision and the lack of integration that typifies many community transport systems.

We also commend the fact that the Bill establishes targets for the reduction of pollution and traffic at local level. That is very good—although we are disappointed that the logic of that has not been extended to the establishment of national targets for traffic reduction. In recent days, the Minister for Transport has expressed a view which has been echoed here today, saying that the Government's targets now relate to slowing the rate of traffic growth, rather than to an actual and absolute reduction. The Deputy Prime Minister entered the debate this afternoon, but confused the issue again by saying—if I heard him correctly—that there would be fewer car journeys after his policies had taken effect. That sounds to me like a pledge to reduce traffic levels, which all Liberal Democrats would wholeheartedly support.

Funding the alternatives is of course crucial, but many people throughout the country are rightly sceptical about those alternatives, and about the objective of persuading travellers to use public transport. They think that at present there is little opportunity for that, and they will continue to be sceptical about the Government's proposals until funds and provision have caught up with need, and real choices exist.

The Bill contains good proposals for buses. A key aspect of the implementation of local transport plans will be improvements in the quality and number of bus services, and response to customer requirements. We also welcome the huge boost for quality partnerships, which will be a cornerstone of future transport policy. We hope that powers will exist to enforce them, and to ensure that high standards are delivered. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) hopes to say something about open-top buses if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I will not detain the House by talking about that now.

We broadly welcome the proposed information and ticketing systems, and the new powers for traffic commissioners—especially the environmental aspects of those powers—but we shall want to examine them in more detail in Committee. We are disappointed by what is proposed for concessionary fares, however. We share the Government's desire for the introduction of such fares, but we are less happy about the delay that has occurred. Concessionary fares were first mentioned in 1998, and their introduction apparently requires only £25 million per annum—so why is it being delayed until 2001–02?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): It is a question of legislation.

Mr. Moore: The Government have been keen to introduce certain measures ahead of legislation when they have considered them to be a good idea. We wish that they had done the same with the concessionary fares scheme, and we do not believe that this legislation will take a further year to introduce.

The proposals for road charging and workplace parking will clearly tackle head on the problems of congestion and a crumbling infrastructure. Although the plans are understandably controversial and will have to be implemented carefully, there is growing acceptance that, without charging, congestion will become worse, not better. Even the CBI, in its briefing for today's debate, says that it

"supports the principle of congestion charging, but only if it brings demonstrable reductions in traffic and the revenue is ploughed back into transport improvement."

That returns us to the need for an absolute reduction in traffic, rather than a slowing down of the growth in the rate of traffic.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman supports congestion charging because he thinks that it will reduce the amount of traffic. What sort of drivers does he think will leave the roads as a result of such charging?

Mr. Moore: I have said that I think that until people have alternatives to the car, which many in different parts of the country do not have at present, they will not be tempted to abandon it, but I do not wish to be quite as cynical as the hon. Gentleman: I hope that things will change over the next few years.

[Mr. Moore]

The key to road user charging and workplace parking must be additionality. The revenue must represent an extra resource for transport funding, and must not be seen as a replacement for other Government finance. Ministers have said that that is their intention, but, if that is to be believed and taken on board, we will have to ensure that there are agreed baselines for existing transport expenditure and equalisation between different areas of the country, as certain parts have enjoyed higher investment than others. Indeed, once those systems are implemented, it will be critical that areas with more scope for congestion charging have their revenues shared out and equalised with others that have less scope.

On the proposals for the Strategic Rail Authority, there is clearly a need to sort out the mess that privatisation has left behind—which is widely acknowledged except by Conservative Members. The Liberal Democrats have supported the shadow Strategic Rail Authority. Legislation for the SRA proper is also to be welcomed and encouraged. However, we require clarification—I hope that, in Committee, we will get it—on the respective roles and responsibilities of the SRA and the regulator, particularly over such things as the national rail inquiry service.

The Minister will probably be aware of concerns that the SRA's potential direct involvement with Railtrack could undermine train operating companies. Some anxiety has been expressed by both TOCs and Railtrack on that issue. It is important that we get further clarification as the Bill proceeds through the House.

Liberal Democrats would like to stress in particular that, although there is much to commend in the Bill, we regret the fact that the Government have not taken the opportunity to establish a strategic transport authority. The Bill repeatedly highlights the need to integrate local authorities' provision of transport service. We have already focused on the lack of national guidance or targets for traffic reduction. Opportunities should be seized now to integrate bus and train services and other modes of public transport, so we hope the Government will think again.

Dr. Godman: On the question of a strategic transport authority, does the hon. Gentleman agree that, for many of our coastal and island communities in Scotland, an important element of any integrated transport system is passenger ferry services? Does he agree that the Caledonian MacBrayne company performs that service, requires a decent subsidy and should remain in public ownership?

Mr. Moore: I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman, whose argument will find echoes throughout the country and underlines the importance of a strategic transport authority to cover all the different aspects of transport throughout the country.

The issue of safety has dogged the transport debate over many years, but particularly since the Ladbroke Grove tragedy. We have heard Ministers talk about the fact that they are "minded" to remove the safety and standards directorate from Railtrack, and Liberal Democrats recognise that inquiries are on-going and that Ministers will wait for the results before they make final decisions.

We believe that the case for an independent safety body to tackle the issues of air, sea and rail has never been stronger. The Transport Sub-Committee has recommended it and we would endorse that recommendation. Again, we hope that, at some stage in the Bill's passage, the Government will consider the inclusion of such a body.

Safety is at the heart of the final part of the Bill to which I turn my attention: the part privatisation of NATS. The Liberal Democrats have made it clear that we oppose that part privatisation. Again, I stress the importance of the comments of the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh and the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody).

I want to focus on three aspects of the argument: the undoubted need to finance the infrastructure that NATS requires over the next decade; the question whether private sector expertise is to be brought into the process; and the important issue of safety, which must not be forgotten.

I do not think that anyone denies that NATS needs substantial investment—today, the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned £1.3 billion; at briefings at NATS, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath and I were told that the figure is £1 billion over 10 years—but we are told that the money is not available, or that it would count against the public sector borrowing requirement, which would be unacceptable.

I should not like to underestimate the investment required—the sum is substantial, and will make the difference in determining whether NATS is able to progress and develop—but would point out the crucial fact that, at £100 million per annum, it amounts to less than 15 per cent. of the credit approvals announced last week as part of the one-year local transport plans. Therefore—relatively—the sum is not huge.

If the sum is truly an obstacle and there is no way round it, surely other structures short of privatising the air traffic services are possible and must be considered. The Select Committee drew attention to some options. Liberal Democrat Members favour an independent publicly owned corporation or a trust. However, the key feature in the debate is that, because of regulation and Eurocontrol, NATS has a guaranteed market and pricing, which makes it an attractive proposition for bond financing. Conversely, as other hon. Members have said, the growth potential of NATS is relatively restricted.

Liberal Democrat Members do not believe that the PSBR rules should get in the way of the investment. If that happened, it would be a case of accountancy getting in the way of real decisions. It would also undoubtedly give rise to the strong suspicion that the Treasury was simply protecting a holy grail, and that no one in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions could seriously tackle the issue.

With a highly regulated market and caps on pricing and growth opportunities, scope for a public-private partnership operator to increase revenue is limited. Consequently, cost pressures increase—which is the point at which concerns arise about safety. I have spoken to representatives of both management and unions at Prestwick, and they—particularly union representatives—do not understand or accept that one can bear down on costs without creating consequences for safety.

Private sector expertise has frequently been cited as the solution. Although Liberal Democrats would be the first to welcome the suggestion that the private sector should

have a role, we do not accept that the private sector is infallible. The prospect of using private sector expertise raises two issues: first, the lack of progress at Swanwick, and the major role played there by the private sector; and, secondly, the issue of what will happen to NATS' current management. Are the current management part of the Government's long-term or short-term plans, and who has the upper hand? To outsiders, the situation is very clear.

Although safety is an emotive topic, and we have to approach it with some sensitivity, the facts speak for themselves: the public sector record is first class, and the ethos of the personnel is beyond reproach. Many ordinary people will ask, "Why tamper with that highly successful arrangement?"

We are often told that the safety arrangements will not change with NATS in the private sector. Indeed, we are told that, if the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS are completely separate and given the infrastructure spending that we are debating today, safety may improve. Liberal Democrat Members argue that both those improvements are possible within the public sector context, and urge both to be developed within that context.

Liberal Democrats remain concerned that commercial imperatives bearing down on costs will drive straight up against safety—a dilemma that no one should be forced to confront.

Mr. Dalyell: Is the hon. Gentleman advising other Liberal Democrats to vote for the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang)?

Mr. Moore: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Only last Thursday, I had the pleasure of accompanying him on an aircraft up to Edinburgh, and I know how seriously he takes these issues. In answer to his direct question: yes, we shall be supporting the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh and voting against the Bill.

The public, staff, unions and pilots all oppose the privatisation proposal. Ultimately, for Liberal Democrat Members, it comes down to a simple judgment: we have a world-leading and highly respected air traffic system that requires investment; that investment could be made available, but, instead, we are being asked to gamble on an untried and unproven private sector. Is it any wonder that people are so opposed to the proposals?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Moore: I have two more sentences, I am afraid.

We would like to support many parts of the Bill, and will return to those points in Committee. This evening, however, we will vote for the amendment and against the Bill.

5.45 pm

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): I will detain the House briefly on just three points. First, however, I declare an interest listed in the Register of Members' Interests as I chair a bus company which is part of the National Express group.

The privatisation of National Air Traffic Services is the most controversial part of the Bill, has taken up much of our debate so far and is the subject of the amendment moved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang). I do not want to spend the bulk of my time on NATS, but if any member of the Government can be trusted to act properly on it, it is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. He has not come only recently to the principle of private involvement. More than a decade ago, when the Opposition transport team was comprised of him and me, my right hon. Friend, in the face—as now—of scorn from the Conservatives, advanced the philosophy that the Treasury could not do everything. Indeed, he said, if left to its own devices, it would do very little. Private sector finance was needed, he said, for many industries that had been traditionally publicly owned.

I was subject to enormous pressures at that time as my right hon. Friend sent me—hon. Members might wonder who could have been better—on a charm offensive around some of London's more expensive restaurants to meet captains of industry. Alas, we did not know in the late 1980s that it would be eight or nine long years before my right hon. Friend and my party took their rightful places on the Government Benches. If the captains of industry had known that, they might have been more reluctant to pick up the tabs. So, my right hon. Friend has not come lately to the view that we need some private money. The touching faith of some of my hon. Friends in the Treasury's advancement of moneys needed for air traffic control and other parts of the traditional public sector is somewhat misplaced.

I have listened carefully to the debate so far, particularly to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), the Chairman of the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. She was somewhat scathing about what she called the Exeter experience. NATS does not provide air traffic control services at the majority of airports in the United Kingdom. Indeed, of the 28 airports that have more than 6,000 air transport movements a year, NATS serves a minority. Seventeen airports employ their own air traffic personnel, and only 11 use NATS.

To those of my hon. Friends who express understandable concern about safety, I have to say that I remain to be convinced that landing at Belfast international airport, which uses NATS, is inherently less dangerous than landing at Belfast city airport, which provides its own controllers. I remain to be convinced that someone expecting to land at Birmingham airport, which uses NATS—and is the nearest to my constituency—who is diverted for some reason to East Midlands airport, which provides its own air traffic controllers, will grip his or her seat even more anxiously. I cannot see matters that way, and the safety angle, though understandable, has been somewhat overblown.

Dr. Strang *rose—*

Mr. Snape: Although I have only a quarter of an hour, I am happy to give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh because he moved the amendment.

Dr. Strang: Ask pilots. They are frightened.

Mr. Snape: I do not believe it. I have spoken to representatives of everyone involved in aviation. Many

[Mr. Snape]

prefer the status quo. It is almost always more comfortable to leave things as they are rather than change anything. But, after perhaps too many cynical years in the House, I believe that the long-term income stream needed for air traffic control services in the UK requires us to find a different way forward. I do not want to be personally offensive towards my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh because I accept that he feels worried about this matter. However, I cannot help but feel that if he still sat on the Government Front Bench, he would troop through the Lobby in favour of the Bill tonight. To personalise this important matter does no service to what should be—

Dr. Godman: You are personalising this.

Mr. Snape: I am not. It is true that my right hon. Friend would have voted for the Bill had he still been a Minister. I have to say that it must be a source of annoyance to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), whom I have known for many years, that many of the signatories to the amendment have been voting against Labour Governments for most of their political careers, except, of course, at election time, when they usually have a picture of the leader of the day on the front of their election address. One or two of them do not need any excuse to vote against their own party—it helps them to prove that they are better socialists than the rest of us.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Snape: No, I have already given way once and I only have 15 minutes. I do not include my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) in that accusation. I know that he always votes according to his conscience.

I welcome the provisions on the rail industry. I cannot understand the attitude of the Conservative party. Indeed, I barely understand the speeches of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) who—temporarily, one hopes—is the Opposition spokesman on transport matters. Two weeks ago, he made a speech and went home ill. He disappeared again after today's speech, leaving the rest of us in that condition.

The right hon. Gentleman attacks the setting up of the Strategic Rail Authority and, presumably, the work of Sir Alastair Morton, its chairman. I believe that the setting up of the SRA is very much overdue. The work in which the SRA envisages getting involved is essential for the railway system. The Labour party did not welcome the previous Government's rail privatisation. But we are where we are, and it seems that only the SRA has the power to weld together the disparate groups running the railway industry into a national railway system.

To make trains more attractive to the car owner—I realise that the Conservative party pooh-poohs such a philosophy at present, although it did not in the fairly recent past—we need a networkwide system of express trains which, because of their speed, comfort and safety, attract people who would otherwise use their cars for long journeys. If each train operating company concentrates exclusively on its own geographical area, that will not be achieved. I realise that there is some access between train operating companies and involvement with different train operating companies on the provision of long-distance services, particularly cross-country services, but it is not enough, in my view. I hope that the SRA will bring pressure to bear to ensure that a genuine alternative to the car for long journeys is provided.

I hope that the SRA will consider the seating on new trains. I do not share Richard Branson's view that trains are aircraft that never get off the ground. I certainly do not share his views on ticket prices for some of his services. However, I think that aircraft-type seating, particularly in multiple-unit trains, is not acceptable on a long journey. It is certainly not attractive enough to lure people away from the alternative of using their car. I hope, therefore, that the SRA will look carefully at such services. To get genuine jam-busters for the railway industry, Sir Alastair Morton will have to bring his renowned muscle to bear.

The SRA has shown a great interest in the provision of rail services in the west midlands, where lies my constituency. The Conservative party has voiced its opposition to the SRA, which has recently set up a review of rail capacity in the west midlands—something that the previous Government never provided. The review will:

"Consider a broad range of capacity solutions proposed by train operators, Railtrack and others, including how best to develop: terminal capacity at Birmingham New Street, Snow Hill and Moor Street; line and signalling capacity; and train capacity."

The review will also:

"Consider capacity solutions which would encompass the role of light rail and the development of terminal complexes."

The Conservative party is against all that. What sort of transport policy does it embrace these days? Of course, we can all ride in our cars—I have one as well, before any Conservative Member makes a sarcastic comment—but we cannot keep driving into towns and cities at 8.30 or 9 o'clock in the morning and home again at 4.30 or 5.30 in the afternoon and expect to do so in any reasonable comfort, without enormous congestion and pollution resulting.

Mr. Jenkin: Would the hon. Gentleman, as a director of National Express, welcome a strategic bus authority and a bus regulator with power to fine bus companies for late-running buses?

Mr. Snape: The hon. Gentleman smirks as though he has made a debating point. He might get a laugh at the Cambridge or Oxford debating society for that question, but he is comparing apples with lemons. *[Interruption.]* Oh yes, he is. The previous Government did not privatise the two industries in exactly the same way. Indeed, they made an equal mess of bus privatisation, which the industry, somewhat belatedly, is doing something to put right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), who is not in his place, trotted out the old story about bus use declining outside London and increasing in London. Bus usage outside London has been declining for some 40 years and only recently has that decline been stemmed. In the west midlands, there is an increase in bus passengers for the first time in four decades, although I take no credit for that.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North in his absence that at the time that the franchising system—because that is basically what it is—was introduced in London, the first to suffer were London bus

drivers, who went from the top of the wages tree to the bottom. If my hon. Friend is advocating that principle in the short term, he should talk to people who work in the bus industry, rather than making speeches in the House.

The Bill contains provisions for quality contracts, which most people in the bus industry are not mad about. We accept that they are enabling provisions only. Ministers—at least in the run-up period to the Bill—made it clear that contracts could be used, but as a safety net only if quality partnerships were not successful. When the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), replies to the debate will he tell us how he thinks such quality partnerships are operating at present and how he sees them working in future?

No one would claim that bus privatisation has been particularly successful, because it has not. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must take his seat. He must also stop that musical box.

Mr. Snape: I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House. I thought that my pager was switched off, and I am very sorry.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman is off-message on buses.

Mr. Snape: That is another witty comment from the Cambridge debating society. I may well be.

In the two minutes left to me, let me say that there are a couple of matters that should be considered. In Birmingham, for example, we run many bus services. We do not have a monopoly, nor does the company that I chair seek one. We have a problem, however, with certain operators who do not consider starting new routes—which we would welcome—but cherry-pick on certain routes that are operated by Travel West Midlands, the major company. I need hardly add that we pay top wages, provide uniforms, canteens, and so on. Many of the smaller operators do not recognise trade unions—we are fully unionised—and operate only one shift to drivers. When such companies do so on the busier routes they are, in our view, guilty of cherry-picking. For example, on one route, an operator registered in November of this year and will deregister those same services in January. That is no way to ensure continuity and a sensible bus operation. Such operators use vehicles which leave a lot to be desired, to say the least.

There is work for traffic commissioners and local authorities. I hope that Ministers will, under the Bill, correct some of the anomalies and problems that have cropped up over the years. Overall, I think that the Bill is eminently sensible and will be widely welcomed by railway workers and bus operators. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends who feel sincerely about the future of the air traffic control industry will reflect on the fact that it could not be in better hands than those of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

6 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I begin by declaring an interest; as listed in the register, I am a non-executive director of Unigate, which has a transport subsidiary. However, my real interest in the debate is as a former Secretary of State for Transport. I always thought that the present Secretary of State—I am sorry that he is no longer in the Chamber—would not be up to the job, but I thought it reasonable to give him some time to prove himself. During the two years when I served as Secretary of State, we saw the greatest national and local road-building programme of this decade. We implemented rail privatisation, whence have come all the improvements about which the Secretary of State now boasts. We introduced a host of other initiatives and actions to achieve results, including the Jubilee line extension. I introduced local authority transport plans that put much greater emphasis on park and ride, road safety schemes and comprehensive local plans.

The Secretary of State has held that office for longer than I did; but, during two and a half years, he has been a blustering, dithering disaster. There has been little action on roads, except for the closure of one lane of the M4 for all except the Prime Minister's car. There has been much waffle about integrated transport policy with a series of consultation documents, Green Papers and White Papers; that is no substitute for action. In July, one of the conclusions of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs was that:

> "Unfortunately the Department's achievements, as listed by the Permanent Secretary, have largely been confined to the publication of documents and policy statements and the establishment of task forces. As yet there have been few tangible improvements."

We can say that again.

The Secretary of State is still at it. In his speech of 13 December, he announced that he would publish a comprehensive programme for change in the investment programme next summer. Good heavens—that will be more than three years since the right hon. Gentleman took office, only then will he get round to doing that. During the two and three quarter years since Labour came to power, four Transport Ministers have served under the Secretary of State. They are all Scots. Three of them have Scottish constituencies and their interest in transport is now only inasmuch as it concerns their own constituencies. All Scottish transport issues are settled in the Scottish Parliament and those Members have no interest in transport and road programmes in England—and it shows. Recently, *The Sunday Telegraph* quoted an aide at No. 10, who said:

> "Gus Macdonald is the first Transport Minister who has been up to the job."

Too true—what an admission—but whose fault is it?

To the Secretary of State, an integrated transport policy is a slogan; it is a soundbite to be trotted out on every occasion, but it is no substitute for action. We have had a period of indecision and inaction followed by substantial U-turns, because the right hon. Gentleman's earlier policies have not worked, and will not work. No wonder that four fifths of people disagree with his transport policies, and that many in the media and—it seems—the Prime Minister are calling for him to give up his responsibility for transport policy.

I have examined carefully the right hon. Gentleman's much vaunted speech of 13 December. The comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) on the speech were absolutely correct; the amount of money that we put into public transport, during the years for which the Secretary of State derides us, was much greater than the amount he

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proposes for the next 10 years. Every achievement listed by the Secretary of State in his speech resulted from Conservative policies and decisions: in particular, that private rail investment had gone up by a third; that passenger journeys had increased by 25 per cent.; that there were 1,000 extra rail services every day; and that freight had increased by 20 per cent. over the past two years. That compares to a steady decline in every year before privatisation. Rail privatisation brought about a change in culture, putting the focus on the customer and ensuring that services were directed to improvements for the customer.

Meanwhile, investment in National Air Traffic Services and the Scottish control centre at Prestwick has been delayed by the right hon. Gentleman's dithering over the privatisation of the service.

Ms Osborne: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacGregor: No, I shall not give way, as we do not have a long time for our speeches.

Government investment in the London underground—excluding the Jubilee line—will be much less during the coming year than when I was Secretary of State for Transport. The Government's future plans for the underground are now in disarray because of their U-turn over Railtrack.

The new local transport plans, about which the Secretary of State has huffed and puffed for two and a half years, differ little from our transport polices and programmes—the TPP. Park and ride and local safety schemes were included in those programmes. The difference was that the amount of money that we were giving local authorities for those programmes was much greater even than that which the Government have announced for the coming year, which they boasted was an improvement. If we compare the figures, we see that it is a good deal less than we gave local authorities every year.

I welcome the U-turn on bypass schemes, for which I have long argued. During the Conservative Government, 13 bypasses were built in my constituency; I am glad that we have finally been granted one by the Labour Government. However, it could have been started two years ago. Other bypasses and road improvement programmes in Norfolk are ready to be started, but all have been delayed because of the Government's decisions on road expenditure during the past two years. The country needs money, investment and action—not boasting from the Secretary of State about what he plans to do.

I am not talking about new roads, but—as I did when I was Secretary of State—about bypasses and improvements to the existing road infrastructure. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) has already referred to the Secretary of State's remarks when he took office. The Secretary of State said that, in five years' time, he would have failed if there were not far fewer journeys by car. As he showed in his speech of 13 December, and in his comments today, he now agrees that there should not be a national road traffic reduction target. However, far fewer journeys by car means a reduction in road traffic. The right hon. Gentleman claimed that there would be far fewer journeys by car by the time that he left office, but by abandoning the reduction target, he knows that he has failed.

Lord Macdonald, now appointed as Transport Minister, said recently that improving the efficiency of engines is a more realistic way than traffic reduction of tackling pollution. We have been telling Labour that for years. The improvements that have taken place since 1992 in car technology have produced a substantial reduction in pollution—as the Automobile Association has demonstrated. That offers the Government lessons not only for the road programme but for the fuel duty escalator. The reduction in pollution resulting from technology took place after the Conservative Government introduced the escalator. The escalator is now irrelevant to tackling pollution.

We all know that the Secretary of State has been opposed to road building throughout his time in office. Because of that, there has been a complete lack of investment in road schemes, and traffic delays have increased by more than 10 per cent. over two years—as is shown by recent evidence from the AA—another example of failure. No doubt, that is why the Government are coming round to the view that they need to spend a bit more on roads. They should have realised that two years ago. Meanwhile, we have suffered the enormous inconvenience and problems caused by two years of delay and dithering.

What does the Bill add up to? I agree with the Secretary of State that the measures dealing with NATS are by far the most important. On 11 November, a letter was sent to all Conservative colleagues on this subject, containing one of the most devastating criticisms of NATS. It was written by one of my colleagues and made three major criticisms. The first was that

"Labour proposed a three-way split of NATS shares."

As a result of that and the

"special voting arrangements . . . to protect the interest of the private sector partner"

there was confusion as to who would control NATS. The letter asked:

"Who will take ultimate responsibility? Will a minority stake give majority voting rights?"

The second criticism was about possible foreign ownership. The third was that

"in opting for their scheme and abandoning ours"—

that is the Conservative approach—

"Labour have delayed badly-needed investment."

How true that is; as I pointed out earlier, investment has been delayed. The writer of the letter continued:

"In direct contrast to Labour's position, we favour a straightforward privatisation of NATS. Shares would be issued to the public and to staff. We would establish an independent regulator to police the highest safety standards. Significant funds for badly-needed investment in air traffic control would be raised."

At the time, I nearly wrote to the writer to congratulate him on producing one of the best brief pieces that I had read on the Government's proposals. The letter concluded:

"They appear to allow a foreign-owned investor to control Britain's airways by holding a minority of the shares. They will not generate as much investment as a simple privatisation. They continue to delay investment . . . Labour's plans are complicated

and opaque. The commonsense Conservative alternative would deliver the highest levels of safety and investment through a simple and transparent privatisation."

The letter described Labour's U-turn since coming to office. It was written by the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward). Last week, I had intended to read it out and compliment him on the succinct way in which he put the case. I have to say to him—no longer as my hon. Friend—that I hope that he will stick to his guns, and that he will support our policies as he did two weeks ago.

The workplace levy will impose a further burden on businesses at precisely the time that they do not want such burdens. I notice from information provided by the Local Government Association that only a fifth of local authorities are willing even to pilot such a scheme, given suitable guidance, which they do not believe that they have received yet. I believe that, given the formidable opposition that there will be locally, very few of those local authorities will ever put forward schemes.

If that is true of the workplace levy, it is even more true of the road congestion tax. There are very many powerful arguments against introducing such a tax; let me outline a few. I understand that £1 in every £3 of revenue raised will be spent on administration. That must make it one of the costliest administrative schemes in terms of the relationship between administrative costs and revenue raised. Traffic will avoid the areas where there is congestion charging, thereby causing huge congestion just outside those areas. There will be problems about arbitrary boundaries. There will also be tremendous difficulties about deciding who will be exempted from the road congestion tax—for example, the disabled and those whose journeys are necessary.

Perhaps the most formidable criticism is that, as the LGA has shown in its survey, only 6 per cent. of local authorities are willing even to pilot a road congestion charge scheme, given suitable guidance. No wonder the Secretary of State is saying that congestion charges will not be introduced until the year 2005. I venture to predict that very few local authorities will introduce such a scheme in the year 2005. As that date will be well beyond the next general election, it is a complete waste of time to include that proposal in the Bill.

I take a different view about motorway tolling, for which I remain a strong advocate. As I pointed out in the Queen's Speech debate, I had obtained agreement from the Treasury for the hypothecation of motorway tolling, as was made clear in the consultation document that we published. The then Chancellor of the Exchequer agreed to that. Therefore, motorway tolling is not a new concept. It is a sensible way of getting extra resources into transport, because the money that is paid by those who use the motorways will be used to improve the motorway system. As every hon. Member knows, so many motorways still need major improvement but are not getting it.

Motorway tolling is a sensible proposal, and would be workable once the required technology was available. I strongly criticise the Government for running down the relevant technology programme, not pushing it forward. In fact, they are taking up the wrong type of congestion charging. They should have gone for motorway tolling, instead of going for something that poses many more formidable difficulties, which will not work and which will not be introduced any way.

I am on the subject of hypothecation, I want to say something about the Secretary of State's proposals on fuel duty escalators and the hypothecation of those revenues. As so many hon. Members have pointed out, the crucial issue is whether those funds will amount to genuine additionality. I have a shrewd suspicion that the Treasury knows perfectly well that the funds will be a replacement for money that it would otherwise claw back. In other words, there will be no additionality.

The other problem is that such money as goes to transport from the fuel duty escalator will not necessarily benefit the people who have to carry the burden of the extra fuel duty. That is especially true in rural areas. Rural motorists, very often of modest means, will suffer most from that fuel duty increase, and yet they will see no substantial benefits from the revenue. Unlike motorway tolling, this hypothecation does not work; it will not benefit those who have to pay.

I should have liked to refer to Strategic Rail Authority, but I will conclude. I always recognised that rail privatisation would need development and change as it moved along. I especially support the idea of longer franchises. That is sensible because it enables the franchisees to invest. I had hoped to extend the franchises myself. However, the Bill poses the real risk of too much interference by the Government and too much of a return to public sector interference. I hope that that threat will be probed hard in Committee.

The Bill simply does not measure up to the claims that the Secretary of State has made for it. Of its four measures, one is badly thought through, two are irrelevant because they will not be implemented, and on rail many questions must be asked to ensure that the legislation will not reverse many of the benefits that we have achieved from railway privatisation.

6.15 pm

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. Many hon. Members are aware that I have a strong constituency interest in the issue of National Air Traffic Services. Although I agree with my hon. Friends who have welcomed other aspects of the Bill, I want to confine my remarks to voicing several concerns about the proposed public-private partnership for NATS. I hope that Ministers will be prepared to listen to those concerns, which have been expressed by many of my constituents, and adapt their proposals in a way that would enable the Government to achieve their objectives while reaching a consensus among all the parties involved, with the possible exception of the Conservative party.

NATS has been in the front of my mind for a considerable time—since just before the most recent general election, to be precise—but that is not the only reason why I feel that its future must be resolved without further delay. In particular, I am concerned about the completion of the new Scottish centre and the flight data processing system 2—FDPS2—private finance initiative contract at Atlantic house in Prestwick. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State believes that PPP is the best way to secure that investment.

I ask my right hon. Friend to reflect on the experience of those who actually work in Prestwick. There is a legacy of mistrust dating back to the previous Government, and I must inform my hon. Friends that the work force at Atlantic house no longer believe that the new Scottish

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centre will go ahead under any structure, far less PPP. Previous Conservative Governments made several attempts to privatise air traffic control—all of which met with overwhelming opposition and did not go ahead. Swanwick and the two PFI projects that the Tories introduced in Scotland have been unmitigated disasters, and Swanwick was only recently set on track. For many years, the investment required by NATS has been far too slow in coming. When Swanwick was eventually brought on stream, it had totally unrealistic time scales. That was partly due to political pressure. I am sure that, by now, everyone is aware of the situation since then.

The Tories called into question the two-centre strategy—did we need a centre at both Swanwick and Prestwick? I find it ironic that the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) is blaming the present Government for delays in investment. As long ago as 1993, a PFI contract was agreed for the new Scottish centre. As it turned out, that would have been a scandalous waste of public money and would have been totally unworkable. Those of us who are concerned about Prestwick and want it to go ahead bought into the PFI after the general election, initially because it was the only show in town. Every effort was made to make it workable, but we now know that it was not.

The previous Government must have been aware of the debacle at Swanwick and, for that matter, at Prestwick. If they were not, they certainly should have been. In the past two and a half years, I have had quite a lot of time to reflect on the issue, and I have had reason to wonder why my predecessor had so very little to say, because he was not known as a shrinking violet when it came to expressing his views. What was he doing on a matter so crucial to the constituency? Given all that history and the sorry tales of indecision, delays and absolutely no strategic direction for NATS, can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, or anyone else, be surprised that the work force is sceptical, frustrated and angry, and that morale is at an all-time low?

Just before the general election, the Labour party announced that privatisation could not be ruled out. That was in the context of a black hole in the public finances, when the Tories had already included in their forecasts their estimate of the receipts from privatisation. That led to widespread dismay in my constituency at least, given the previous record on the issue.

The question that must be answered is why something that is so crucial to public safety was regarded as a no-go area one day, but acceptable for privatisation the next. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State now proposes a public-private partnership, but says that that is not privatisation by another name. I suggest that some of his difficulties in that regard date back to the first announcement. Unfortunately, the proposal now lacks credibility for those who work at Atlantic house in Prestwick.

Given all the problems, delays and indecisions that I have outlined, it was never going to be easy for my right hon. Friend to come up with a solution to the problem. I realise and accept, as do most of those to whom I have spoken, that greater commercial freedom is required to provide the necessary investment for the future needs of NATS. No one is opposed to PPP in principle; the issue is the form that that should take. If the Government conclude that there is only one viable way forward, they should justify it in detail and tell us why it is better than the other options proposed.

My right hon. Friend has already taken some of our concerns on board through the stakeholders council, but discussion is needed on its powers. What will it do? He has pledged to protect the pensions of both existing and retired employees. I have raised that issue with him, and I welcome his commitment on that together with his assurances on preventing any surplus from being removed from the scheme through the trust deed.

Much has been made of the issue of safety, and my right hon. Friend will be aware that air traffic controllers are questioning the proposal. Therefore, I should like to share with the House some of the worries that the air traffic controllers in my constituency have raised with me. They believe that safety will be compromised—not deliberately, but unavoidably—because of the controlling interest of the profit motive and the need to earn dividends for shareholders. NATS cannot boost profits in the short to medium term by putting up charges. Therefore, it is feared that the only alternative is to reduce running costs. For example, the controllers point to the wholesale redundancies in the railway industry following privatisation.

There have already been cuts in the number of air traffic control staff during the past five years—despite a 20 per cent. increase in traffic over the same period—because of Government and airline pressure to keep costs down. As we all know, controllers and engineers work under immense pressure, struggling to keep pace with record levels of traffic and working with ageing equipment. There is a tremendous fear that that pressure will be added to by a private sector company that is likely to focus on working time as a means to reducing costs.

Controllers hours are currently regulated to minimise fatigue and to reduce the likelihood of accidents. NATS has enhanced arrangements that recognise the exceptionally busy airspace in, for example, the London area, where controllers take a break every 90 minutes rather than the statutory two hours. That is obviously expensive in staffing terms and is seen as an easy target for a cost-cutting private sector owner.

It has also been alleged to me that the incidence of air crews in British Airways using the captain's discretion to exceed duty flying time has risen dramatically since the privatisation of the company. Can the Minister confirm that? The fact that private companies own airport air traffic control centres has also been mentioned. I have been informed that most breaches of the regulations covering air traffic control hours investigated by the safety regulation group of the Civil Aviation Authority occur in private airports, where low staffing levels can result in controllers working beyond the two hours limit or staying on beyond the end of a shift. The response of such operators is not to increase staffing levels so that they can cope, but to seek changes in legislation to allow them to continue with their current practices.

There are also concerns that investment decisions will be based on commercial rather than safety factors. The example is cited of the privately owned Belfast international airport, which has already been mentioned in the debate. It refused to pay for a vital secondary radar system, despite a recommendation that it was necessary

following a serious near miss, because a nearby competitor—Belfast city airport, which is also private—would benefit from the equipment.

A further issue arises from the relationship between NATS and the general aviation community of flying clubs and small operators. They do not, at the moment, need airline operating certificates. Unless they are in controlled airspace, they are under no obligation to contact air traffic control. However, they are encouraged to do so to ensure that controllers are aware of all the traffic movements across the system. NATS provides several air traffic control services free of charge for that reason. It is thought that charges are likely to be introduced by a private company and that that may result in small operators being less willing to maintain contact with air traffic control, thereby reducing safety for other airspace users.

We have already heard that NATS management has a first-class operational record, but a dismal record on project management for investment. I agree that that problem should be addressed, but how will that be done in the context of an imperative to expand NATS business? Will my right hon. Friend find a way to access private sector expertise and investment for capital projects, distinct from the operational function?

I know that my right hon. Friend very strongly refutes the accusation that he is jeopardising safety and that he feels that his plans to separate the safety function from the operational function are sufficient. However, air traffic controllers in my constituency have expressed to me their serious and genuine concerns—and, after all, they are in a position to know. It is incumbent upon me, as the local Member of Parliament, to raise those concerns in the debate, and therefore I would be grateful if the Minister would tell me how they will be dealt with under PPP.

I return to the issue that is of most concern to me, and which is my priority in the debate. I refer to the completion of two projects: FDPS2 and the new Scottish centre. Over the past two and a half years, I have been given repeated assurances that the projects would go ahead and that the Government were committed to the two-centre strategy. My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) has already referred to that.

I have rehearsed some of the history of the projects, but the recent position is that further delays have been caused by the change from funding and the knock-on effect of the Swanwick delays. The first phase has been started with public money, and I very much welcome that, but when will the second phase begin? I am aware that the Government introduced the projects to ensure that the operational infrastructure would meet growing demand and would fit in with their wider plans for PPP for NATS.

At the time when the original tender documents were issued, NATS estimated that the centre would be needed in about 2000, but the latest estimated date is 2005 or 2006. Is the new Scottish centre being further delayed because of PPP discussions? Does my right hon. Friend and his colleagues understand that that is leading to further disillusionment, and scepticism at Prestwick that there is any intention of ever having a new Scottish centre? My constituents are fed up with the speculation and doubt.

Again, the centre is being used as a political football in the debate. Parties such as the Scottish National party took no interest in the issue until they sensed the possibility of some political air miles. Given the activities of SNP Members, those air miles will not get them even to the end of the runway. They are so interested in the issue that they cannot even be bothered to attend the debate. However, I understand that the SNP intends to raise the issue in the Scottish Parliament, which has no power to deal with it. It should come to Westminster and be dealt with as a reserved issue here.

In addition to the speculation about the new Scottish centre, I am aware of problems with the PFI contract for FDPS2. Conservative Members have the audacity to talk about a botched PPP and the delays caused by this Government, but they left nothing but disaster in their wake. Will my hon. Friend the Minister inform the House of the current status of the project? Will it go ahead under the present contractor, or is it the intention to incorporate it into the PPP? Will there then be further delays?

Last week, I heard the Transport Minister, my noble Friend Lord Macdonald, and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), give evidence to the Transport Sub-Committee. I join with others in paying tribute to the work of the Committee. It has taken detailed evidence on the subject, which has been useful, and its view should be taken seriously. However, I am worried because my noble Friend inferred that the new Scottish centre would not go ahead if PPP was rejected. I have the same fear about the Oceanic project. I am very aware of the time scales involved, so will my hon. Friend the Minister tell us about the implications for the two projects?

It was stated earlier that the two-centre strategy may be written into the Bill. Will the Government accept an amendment in my name, at a later stage in the proceedings, to achieve that? That would go a long way towards quelling fears in Scotland, particularly in my constituency, about investment that is so important to our economy.

6.30 pm

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): I must declare an interest as I receive an income from two energy groups.

I listened to the speech by the Secretary of State and found myself moved by his introductory remarks, in which he catalogued the way in which he has, over several decades, taken an interest in transport policy. He is genuinely an idealist, but he must know, when he looks at himself in the mirror, that the Bill bears no relation to his ambitions and will make almost no difference to transport in this country. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) issued a devastating critique of the Bill and described those parts of it that are absolutely irrelevant.

I fear that the Secretary of State and his team have simply parted company with reality. During the past hour and a half, while we have been sitting here in air-conditioned luxury, sprawling on our green Benches with plenty of room about us, the experience of our constituents has been extremely different. They have been making their way home from work in extraordinarily crowded conditions. They have been shoved into trains or they have been sitting in traffic jams. Common sense tells us that transport in this country needs not more reviews, which we heard the hon. Member for West Bromwich,

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East (Mr. Snape) call for, or more co-ordination, regulation and interference, as promised in the Bill, but more capacity.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk was Transport Secretary, he gave us more capacity, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) when he was in that post. If commuters on their way home this evening hear that the House is debating the first major Transport Bill for many years—a 258-page Bill of 231 clauses and 26 schedules—will they not ask how much new capacity the Bill will provide, how many new railway lines will be built, and how much easier the Bill will make people's journeys? The answer is that it will make no difference to anybody's journey or to transport capacity.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: How many miles of new railway were constructed during the 18 years of Conservative Government?

Mr. Portillo: I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman how many miles were constructed, but I can tell him that we constructed the Jubilee line extension, the docklands light railway, the Manchester metrolink, the new tram system in Sheffield and the channel tunnel, and we implemented the electrification of the east coast main line. Those are all Conservative achievements. In the two and a half years during which this Government have been in power, they have not even mentioned the possibility that they might build more railway lines.

In an Opposition day debate about 10 days ago, we demonstrated clearly and conclusively that the amount of investment now going into London Underground is less than it was under the previous Government. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire pointed out that despite the great hype about investment over the next 10 years, the amount is smaller than that in the investment programme that was bequeathed to the Government.

Over the past two and a half years, we have seen the Secretary of State's transport policy sagging and collapsing like a tired souffle. We have seen him regularly out-manoeuvred by the Treasury. We have seen him denied funds and duped. Quite honestly, I feel sorry for the right hon. Gentleman. The last time that he was here we intimated to him that he was about to lose his job and responsibilities, and he scowled at us—and once he even waved his fist. None the less, there has been a change of ministerial responsibilities since then and certainly a change of rhetoric, if not of policy.

Last week, we saw the insulting sight of the Prime Minister travelling by tube to the dome. Why was that insulting? Because he did it for the television cameras, as a publicity gimmick, which further demonstrated the extent to which the Government are completely out of touch with what their constituents are experiencing.

All that the Bill introduces is a call for co-ordination, integration and regulation. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) loves that stuff. She is much more interested in the extent to which transport is regulated, planned and controlled than in how much transport is provided for people to travel on. It is of no interest to her that we now have more bus and rail services—something of which the Government themselves boast—because that has not been planned. There was an intimation of what might result from the Bill when the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East said that he looked forward to having a Strategic Rail Authority so that it could plan the seats on trains. Is that really the sort of minimalist intervention that we seek from the Government?

I heard the Transport Minister, Lord Macdonald, on the radio this morning, and it was clear to me that he had effected a major U-turn in his rhetoric. It was, frankly, pathetic and insulting to the intelligence not only of Parliament, but of the people of this country for him to say that he was able to effect that U-turn because he had just discovered that technological changes in the petrol engine would make it possible for us to achieve our environmental target without cutting the amount of traffic. The Government clearly have a dim view of the intelligence of the British people.

I noticed during the course of that interview that Lord Macdonald seemed to be extremely vague about the details of the Bill. That is all that we can expect now that our Transport Minister is in another place. Why should he care what the Commons is doing today? I have not observed anyone from another place here today to see what we are about. Perhaps that vagueness more precisely reflects the fact that Lord Macdonald does know what is of interest to the travelling public—and he knows that the Bill is irrelevant to that, which is why he is apparently ignorant of the Bill's contents.

If I am a member of the Standing Committee that considers the Bill, there is something that I should like to discover from Labour Members. I want to know why they have declared war on poor people who would like to drive. The only means that the Government have of controlling the amount of traffic on our roads is to price people off the roads. From what I know of my constituents, as they go up the income scale, they long to achieve greater mobility by getting four wheels. Buying a battered old Datsun and being able to take the family around when they choose, how they choose and whither they choose, is a great step forward. For our constituents, that is the great achievement of freedom. The Labour party's only answer for controlling traffic is to slap enormous charges on those who want to drive.

We have had an increase in fuel duties. It is no good saying that the fuel duty escalator was invented by the previous Government. Another 12p per litre has been imposed by this Government. Are they going to say that they are absolutely incapable of making any change? That increase was their decision. They have made it difficult for people on low incomes to drive. All hon. Members know that well-off people are completely indifferent to charging, yet the Bill contains proposals to impose more taxes on people who drive. That is yet another example of the way in which the well off will be able to move about at will, while the poor will be denied the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Portillo: No, I am running out of time.

The Bill completely misses its target. We improve transport by providing more capacity. It is possible that some structural changes will increase capacity.

The structural changes that we made to the bus industry through deregulation, and to the railways through privatisation, meant that new operators came forward and new capacity was provided. The Bill appears to move in the other direction. It will move us away from deregulation and privatisation—the policies that have been successful.

Ministers often boast about the fact that we have more than 1,000 new rail services and more than 1,000 new bus services, but do they not understand that those have been created by allowing freedom, but the Bill will move us in the other direction? *[Interruption.]* It is all very well hon. Members shouting at me, but it was the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East—as a director of a bus company, he has to be in touch with reality—who pointed out that there were more services.

One part of the Bill makes a structural change and can improve capacity: the part that deals with NATS. Of course, if one creates a structure in which more investment can be forthcoming and in which there can be greater innovation and enterprise, it is possible to create new capacity. That is why, in principle, we are in favour of privatisation.

I must echo the words of the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) in the letter that was quoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk a moment ago. This is a thoroughly botched privatisation. What do we mean by that? We mean that the company may be thoroughly confused because it comprises a Government holding and a commercial company's 46 per cent. stake. The commercial company may be British or foreign. If it is foreign, it may not be all that commercial. If it is Thompson CSF, there will be a 40 per cent. French Government stakeholding. What an extraordinary mess to get us into.

The Deputy Prime Minister clearly did not understand the point about the proceeds. The explanatory memorandum makes it absolutely clear that it is anticipated that the proceeds will be £350 million, but that £300 million of that will have to be paid in debt write-off and £35 million in expenses, which will leave only £15 million. The right hon. Gentleman said that the proceeds may not be £350 million. He is absolutely right—they could be great deal less. The proceeds from the sale could be negative.

The other point that the Deputy Prime Minister did not understand was clause 49. I could tell that he did not understand it because when I tried to intervene on him, he ran away in terror. He clearly did not want to discuss the point. He had already said—I hope that *Hansard* bears me out on this—in reply to a question from my Front-Bench team that, for national security reasons, we needed to be able to repeal the golden share clause in secondary legislation. What an extraordinary thing to say. Why?

Labour Members who are worried about NATS privatisation—the public-private partnership—should consider that the golden share, which is their only guarantee of Government control, can be repealed not by primary legislation, as is usual, but by simply putting an order through the House. The golden share on which they are pinning all their hopes could be repealed by minor secondary legislation. I congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench—by huffing and puffing and blowing, they have changed ministerial responsibility, Government rhetoric and Government policy.

In Committee, it is possible for the Labour party to change Government policy: it can be done. All that Labour Members have to do is serve on the Committee and vote in the right way. This Government fall over when anyone blows hard enough. All Labour Members have to do is come with us and vote with us. To do that will require courage, and I shall spell that: C-O-U-R-A-G-E. If Labour Members are really concerned about the privatisation of NATS, all they have to do is serve on the Committee or turn up on Report and vote down the proposal. This Government are not as strong as they look. It is in the hands of Labour Members to join us to defeat aspects of the Bill that they find objectionable. If they do not do so, the fault will lie with them and it will be on their conscience.

6.44 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I do miss the late Alan Clark.

Given that Heathrow airport and the London area and terminal control centre at West Drayton are in my constituency, hon. Members will understand why I shall concentrate on the parts of the Bill that deal with air traffic control.

I should say at the outset that I have no doubts about the Government's commitment to safety or about the Deputy Prime Minister's lifelong commitment to the transport industry and safety. What bewilders a number of us is why, so soon after the commitment that we gave that the air was not for sale, part of the air is to be sold. We ask: what has changed?

I shall deal with some of the Government's arguments that have been set out by Lord Macdonald. The first is that the Bill separates safety regulation from service provision. There is now consensus on that; we support the division and welcome the implementation of the proposal as soon as possible. We believe that it will enhance safety.

The second argument is that the National Air Traffic Services proposal will make charging policy in the industry more transparent. Such greater transparency is welcome in the industry overall. There have been other proposals in the public sector to achieve that end. Another argument was that the proposal would enable NATS to expand its operation overseas. Although there has not been much evidence of that overseas market, such expansion would not require part privatisation, as the public-private partnership proposal.

Another argument is that the proposal will free the service from the constraints of the Treasury, and that it will introduce a structure of incentives and disciplines to maximise efficiency. Let us be clear that the objective on both sides of the House is a modern, safe, efficient, well supplied and investment-rich service. We all agree on that. We on the Labour Benches are very clear that wholesale privatisation would be disastrous. We do not want a rerun of British Rail privatisation, from which it appears the Opposition have learned no lessons. A number of us in our constituencies along the Great Western line have learned several lessons from both Southall and Paddington.

We also agree with the Deputy Prime Minister that we need to get round what he described as "silly Treasury rules". There is a need for long-term, stable investment in air traffic control services, for which NATS staff have been crying out. The service makes a profit for the

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Treasury, and it should be able to modernise and be planned on a stable basis. That does not require the sell-off of the majority shareholding; there are alternatives that do not put safety in the skies at risk.

Our problem is that anyone who has argued for such alternatives has been told that they do so either for industrial or ideological reasons. I regret the allegation that my constituents who are air traffic controllers argue on industrial grounds. Their views, and now those of airline pilots, must be respected as the considered opinions of professionals who are dedicated to the safe and efficient delivery of their services. I resent any allegation that air traffic controllers are motivated by some selfish industrial reasons—far from it. In opposing the sell-off of NATS, they are rejecting the share out of anything up to £25 million-worth of shares. That is not some selfish industrial motive.

It is also argued that we are opposing the proposal for ideological reasons. It is quite the reverse; this is a mirror image of ideology. The Government's argument appears to be based on an ideological bias against the public sector—public sector bad, private sector good. That runs contrary to everything that the Prime Minister has stated. He has said that we must aim to let the public sector do what it is best at, and the private sector what it is best at. NATS is run efficiently, effectively and, above all, safely in the public sector.

We take the clear view that, if there are failings of management or problems on project management resulting from a failure to achieve contract management, the management should be changed, not the service sold off. If the management is poor, it should be replaced with a more effective one that, yes, may be drawn from some elements of private sector expertise. However, I give a warning if there is to be blind faith in private sector management—I have worked in both, public and private.

Let us look no further than the Railtrack investment programme. The Booz-Allen and Hamilton report demonstrated that, as a result of poor management, 22 per cent. of the service was not up to the quality expected. Look at tube service investment by private-sector management of individual projects: a private-sector company, Adtrans, could not even properly measure the gauge in respect of the provision of track and carriages to the London tube, thus delaying improvements to the Central line.

Lord Macdonald of Tradeston has argued that there should be a structure for incentives and disciplines to maximise efficiency—in short, the profit motive. However, I believe that there is a potential conflict between profit and safety. The Secretary of State says that the argument that the profit motive undermines safety has not been proven—but it has been proven to the professionals who run the service. In their submission to the Government, they say that the concerns of NATS staff about a public-private partnership are founded on the experience of other privatised industries, and they drew a parallel with Railtrack and the rail industry.

Mr. Justice Scott-Baker said about the rail industry

"There may be a conflict between profit and safety."

On 25 October, the former head of fire safety for British Rail said on the BBC Radio 4 "Today" programme that safety standards had been "compromised" by privatisation. On "Panorama", Gerald Corbett, chief executive of Railtrack, conceded

"It is impossible to keep everybody happy at the same time. It is actually at the moment unmanageable. We cannot . . . keep shareholders happy at the same time as fulfilling our public service obligations, and that tension is just massive, and it is at the heart of our unpopularity."

Air traffic controllers are clearly concerned that the profit motive will undermine safety. We should rely on the judgment of those operating the service before proceeding further along the path proposed. In their submission, the controllers state that the primary objective of the strategic partner should be, not profit, but safety of flight, security of investment and sensible capacity for future growth.

It has been said that there is no safety problem affecting the air industry generally, but I beg to differ. Last week's debate about air safety revealed that commercial pressures put on pilots and others were putting the industry's record at risk; those pressures arise from profit motivation. It is interesting to note that the role of air traffic control is to ensure safety by mediating between different private companies and the pressures they put on air space. Therefore, we are proposing today to privatise part of the regulation service that keeps our skies safe.

Concerns about safety have not been adequately heeded. We have to listen to what the experts who have, over the years, built up the safety culture are saying to us. We have to ask how we can generate increased stable investment and introduce more effective management while maintaining the safety culture and denying the introduction of the profit motive. There are alternatives. I urge the Government to think again and to review the options that have been put to them. We have to consider how we can introduce a not-for-profit motivation—one that is based on professionalism and regulation, not on the fast buck.

The future should not lie in the profit ethos, but in consideration of other proposals, such as those that have been advanced by the airline industry. The Airline Group, comprising major airline companies, has submitted a proposal to purchase the shareholding and said that it sees an opportunity to run the service on a not-for-commercial-return basis. Given the participants in that group and their direct interest in future charges for the services, it is not surprising that the proposal has met with a degree of scepticism and incredulity.

However, if there is to be a purchase, the possibility of a not-for-commercial-return group gives us an opportunity constructively and creatively to examine ways to enshrine a guarantee that the system will not be run for profit in perpetuity, or in the long term. One of the proposals that has been put forward by operators, air traffic controllers and pilots is that the any sale should lead to the creation of a trust, run on a not-for-profit or not-for-commercial-gain basis. In that way, future investment and future safety would be consolidated within a structure in which we could all have confidence.

The Government and the Select Committee considered the Canadian trust option, and detailed arguments in support of such proposals were laid out by the Committee. However, the Government rejected the Canadian option

too lightly and too swiftly. I plead for that option to be revisited in the Committee on the Bill. It would provide an opportunity to effect a sale, if necessary, and thus a substantial capital receipt, to introduce an element of new management, to create greater accountability and transparency, and to expand overseas—an objective to which the Government appear to be committed. However, it would also provide a guarantee that the service would not be run for profit and that pressures would not be put on the service and staff to reduce conditions or operational costs in such a way as to put safety at risk.

At Heathrow, there are 500,000 transport movements every year. Those movements pass over the heads of my constituents, and I cannot vote for a measure that in any way puts at risk their safety. Many of my constituents work at Heathrow, some as air traffic controllers, so I have to listen to their views. Their views are strong and straightforward: they believe that the Government's proposals will undermine the safety ethos. That will not happen immediately, or overnight; it will occur through a slow process of erosion and will, inevitably, put my constituents at risk in their homes and at work.

I urge the Government to think again about the trust option. That constructive proposal would guarantee safety, provide the income needed and allow long-term investment. In that way, when the Bill returns to the House, we shall be able to support unanimously a constructive plan, instead of having to rehearse the arid arguments of privatisation.

6.58 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) made a brave speech. It will be interesting to see how Ministers respond to his pleas. He clearly conveyed to Opposition Members that good old-fashioned Labour, with its great distrust of the private sector, is alive and well. If the Government allow that mood to spread, where will that leave Labour?

I do not intend to debate NATS, but to examine the Bill in terms of its relevance to my Lancashire constituency and to the wider transport issues that face the United Kingdom. As I sat on a Virgin train that was an hour and three quarters late getting into London, I thought about what I would say in this debate—other than to vent my anger at the delay in that particular form of public transport getting me from A to B. That journey reminded me that the purpose of a transport system is to enable people to get from A to B as quickly as possible, with minimum environmental impact, at good value for money.

I have searched the Bill and the preceding White Paper to find a mission statement or definition that reflects most people's expectations of a transport system, but none have I found. Instead, I find that the Bill is an odd ragbag of measures. The Bill shows that, in many of Labour's activities, the Government and the Deputy Prime Minister are still following the Pontius Pilate approach: they wash their hands of the difficult issues and hand them on to someone else.

As Conservative Members have said, many local authorities will be reluctant to go down the unpopular route of workplace parking or local congestion charges. If nothing else, in competing for business and enterprise, they will suddenly find the town next door saying that it is a charge-free zone. It will be interesting to see how Labour authority will be set against Labour authority by the measure.

Much of what the Deputy Prime Minister said was an attempt to denigrate the previous Government, as if they had had no transport policy. Our developments of the national motorway network, our opening of the door to more investment in rail, our financing and helping of metrolink in Manchester, the Tyneside light rail system and the developments in Croydon, and so on, show that we nailed our colours to the mast. We believed in public transport and put our money where our mouth was.

In contrast, the background to this Bill is that the motorist has become the Government's milch cow for cash. As for the logic of their policies, one has only to consider the Deputy Prime Minister's bizarre decision not to continue the treble carriageway route out to the M40. Within weeks of coming into office, despite the public expense undertaken to increase the size of that corridor, one of the Government's first contributions to improving transport was to maintain congestion to the west of London.

I want to consider the Bill as it affects my constituents. Their problem is getting from north to south on the motorway network. The M6 has become a nightmare. Anyone attempting the journey from Birmingham to Preston on a Friday would have to allow nearly the whole day. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said, the Government have lost two years in dealing with that. My constituents are anxious for developments on the west coast main line and are glad that our privatisations opened the door to more capital for that. The Bill and the accompanying White Paper offer no encouragement for developing a light rail system on the Fylde coast to link Fleetwood, Blackpool, Lytham St. Anne's and Preston. Such a system could revolutionise our area.

A briefing from the Institution of Civil Engineers brings home some facts. In a country where motor vehicles dominate movements of both passengers and freight, the cost of congestion is estimated at £20 billion. The British road system is the most congested in western Europe. In relation to land area, the British motorway network is one of the smallest in Europe. The state of maintenance of our roads is worse than when the Government came into office. The Bill does nothing to address those problems.

That is hardly surprising when one considers the research by W.S. Atkins on behalf of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in assessing whether anything in the Bill would have a measurable, meaningful effect on traffic growth, particularly in the urban environment. This recently published research suggests that even implementing the most radical White Paper policies, such as congestion charging using the powers in the Bill, would result only in arresting the rate of traffic growth nationally. That means that even if the rate of traffic growth is arrested, we will still face an undercapacity problem in our transport system. The Government suggest no solution to that.

Going back to the M6, there is nothing in the Bill or the White Paper—apart from the Birmingham northern relief road—that offers one ounce of extra capacity on that vital north-south link. There is no suggestion of additional lanes. I recognise that building a duplicate M6 is off the agenda, but we face serious constraints. The Government should reconsider because their own research shows that we have a serious undercapacity problem in our transport system.

[Mr. Michael Jack]

In a document deposited in the Library at the beginning of the month, the publication, "Local Transport Today" states that the Commission for Integrated Transport, which was set up by the Government to consider the impact of charging on congestion, said that the

"evidence shows that with a cordon charge of £2.50 a day in all conurbations, coupled with a £3,000 workplace parking levy and limited motorway tolling, traffic is still set to rise overall by 21 per cent. between 1996 and 2010."

Whichever way we look at it, independent and objective assessment of the measures put forward in the Bill as the solution to our transport problems shows that they have already been found wanting.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): The right hon. Gentleman quoted the Institution of Civil Engineers. Is he aware that it states:

"The inclusion in the Bill of powers for local authorities to impose charging for workplace parking and use of roads creates potentially very effective tools to tackle congestion. The establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority should give the necessary strategic leadership to a rail sector which has lacked this since its fragmentation and privatisation."

There is evidence on the other side.

Mr. Jack: The people who make up that institution have a vested interest. Most are representatives of, and paid by, local authorities. They are hardly likely to bite the hand that feeds them. It may well be that they are not yet aware of the independent work to which I referred.

Motorists will resile from the truth about the Government's much professed interest in investing in transport infrastructure. It emerges from paragraph 236 of the explanatory memorandum, which states:

"The local authority road charging and parking levy schemes might generate up to £1 billion net annually by 2005".

That is another £40 per motorist of additional taxation. Is it not remarkable that when the Government talk about investment, they mean, yet again, attacking the motorist? As my right hon. Friends the Members for Kensington and Chelsea and for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) noted, rural motorists and low-income families are the people most affected by the proposals.

As for all the guff about the Strategic Rail Authority bringing new investment, paragraph 4.31 of the White Paper says that the franchising director, who will come under the new authority, will have new money to invest in the railway system. However, paragraph 2.37 of the explanatory memorandum states:

"The creation of the Strategic Rail Authority is not expected to create any significant requirement for additional public expenditure."

There we have it in black and white in the Government's own material. There will be no new money from public sources to inject cash into the rail system. The Government are fond of their own rhetoric but the reality tells a different story.

I am interested in some of the details in the Bill about how the proposals will work. Clause 92 deals with local transport plans, which are a key part of the Government's approach, especially in respect of road traffic congestion charges, because the money from that and workplace parking is supposed to sustain the plans. It states:

"Each local transport authority must develop and implement plans for the promotion and encouragement of safe, integrated, efficient and economic transport."

What a wonderful sentence, but what is the definition of all that? How will we judge the effectiveness of those plans, when the Government refuse to supply any kind of national benchmark so that we can measure whether their policies are improving the nation's transport?

Mr. Gordon Prentice: On that point—

Mr. Jack: No, I am afraid that time forbids me. I have taken one intervention already.

The Government are fond of league tables of performance in education and just about every other area, to show that their judgment is getting better, but on transport, they are remarkably silent. The only thing that they want is an intermodal change, so that people move from one mode to another, but we do not know whether the fundamentals of the transport system will be improved.

We find in clause 140, on road user charging, that

"a local charging scheme may only be made if it appears desirable for the purpose of directly or indirectly facilitating the achievement of policies in the charging authority's local transport plan."

I love the word "indirectly". It moves us a long way from measurable gains resulting from those charges.

Clause 145, which deals with charging schemes, reveals that the Deputy Prime Minister will eventually approve such schemes. The clause refers to them being

"confirmed by the appropriate national authority".

I wonder what British Aerospace in my constituency, which employs 6,000 people and has a couple of thousand workplace parking places for skilled aerospace engineers from all over Lancashire, will think of that? It will be a huge additional cost on BAe's highly competitive business. There is not a prayer of a public transport system bringing those skilled workers from all over the north-west of England to work at that location. I do not see how there will be any gain from that proposal.

The Government speak of diminishing out-of-town shopping, and the renaissance of the city centre, but then propose a mechanism to impose a charge on people who will invest in the city centre and build shoppers' car parks. Wait till customers suddenly twig that the cost of goods in Tesco and Sainsbury's will rise because the Government plan to tax the supermarket car park space. It is the politics of the madhouse, but such are the Government's policies.

In a rational world, peer group pressure exists. Drinking and driving has effectively been eliminated through being perceived as anti-social, because people were convinced by the arguments. The Government must convince people of the benefits of public transport. I believe in it, but it needs up-front investment.

The capacity of the public transport system must be expanded, if people are to be persuaded to shift from their motor cars. There is nothing in the manana world of the Bill to achieve that. When my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk spoke of the measures taking

effect in 2005, he pointed exactly to the Government's problem—long on promises, long on rhetoric and short on delivery.

7.13 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): After that speech, who could be blamed for believing that the Conservatives left us with a transport system that was firing on all four cylinders, and that the problems on the M6 began in May 1997? How ludicrous! The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) spoke of a light rail system in his constituency, which he knows would be the responsibility of the local highway authority under the local transport plan.

Mr. Jenkin: The schemes mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and others were funded by us. Where is the money to fund light rail schemes under the present Government? Can the hon. Gentleman name one light rail scheme that the Government have approved?

Mr. Prentice: The right hon. Member for Fylde mentioned integration. The Commission for Integrated Transport has studied a sample of local transport plans and made a pronouncement: the information is freely available. I suggest that before the hon. Gentleman gets hot under the collar, he looks at information that is in the public domain.

The former Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), had the brass neck to say what he said without accepting any interventions. Despite the fact that, throughout his time as a transport Minister, spending on road maintenance went down, we never get a word of apology from him: he just brushes everything aside. The right hon. Gentleman had the temerity to suggest that local transport plans are no different from the system over which he presided, the TPP—transport policies and programmes—system. Again, that is ludicrous. These days, before any new road is built, a new system of appraisal examines not only transport matters but the scheme's implications for the local economy, jobs, the local environment, wildlife and so on. Those considerations were never built into the system about which the right hon. Gentleman waxed lyrical. His version was not history; it was manufactured.

I support the Bill—or at least most of it. Local transport plans are long overdue. I support the establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority. I support the proposals in the Bill to deal with workplace congestion. The right hon. Member for South Norfolk proposed that in a Green Paper, yet he criticises what the Government are doing as though he had never thought of it himself. The proposal was contained in a document published by the Conservatives when they were in government but, like so many other things, has been airbrushed out of their history.

I have reservations about the public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services, but I am certainly not going into the Lobby with the Conservatives, who want to privatise air traffic control. I am fearful of what would happen if it were privatised. The Conservatives looked into that when they were in government, but they saw the difficulties and backed off. A Government who privatised anything and everything that was not nailed down backed away from privatising NATS as being too hot to handle.

Amazingly, we are picking up the privatisation issue—hot to handle though it may be. If the air traffic controllers are against it, apparently it is their problem. If the pilots flying the planes are against it, apparently it is their problem. If 50 of my hon. Friends point out that the proposal was not in the Labour manifesto in May 1997, word goes out that it is their problem. I can only say that if the Government do not address the concerns of many people, both in this place and outside it, it will be their problem.

I pay tribute to the way in which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has moved the transport agenda forward. My right hon. Friend said that we needed the PPP to allow NATS to invest, citing the famous Treasury rules, which he said were too restrictive. But we are the Government, and no one has ever explained to me why we cannot change the Treasury rules. Is it impossible, with our majority? I see the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) nodding. I have much in common with Liberal Democrats on this issue, as on some others. Why can we not change the rules? We have again heard the mantra, "Private sector good, public sector bad", which my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) mentioned. If project management in the public sector is useless, as we are hearing from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and from those on the Front Bench, the solution is not to privatise but to change the management. It is as simple as that.

There are penalty clauses in commercial contracts. If one side does not do what it is supposed to do, the penalty clauses are supposed to kick in. Why not use them? We are offered a comparison between the Jubilee line, which was a disaster, and the docklands light railway, run and managed by the private sector, which was brilliant. Everyone recognises—and the right hon. Member for Fylde will know this, as he was at the Institution of Civil Engineers when we touched on this—that tunnelling under London for the new Jubilee line was an immensely difficult engineering task. It is silly to compare the two. I hesitate to mention the TUC but I shall do so sotto voce, to say that it opposes the proposal and believes that the Government should fund the investment directly. They could do that, because they are awash with cash. We do not need to part-privatise NATS; the TUC suggests that it could be turned into an independent, publicly owned company based on the Post Office model. The briefing notes suggest that that is okay for the Post Office, but not for air traffic control.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne), who is not in her place, made a suggestion about how to proceed, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington also referred to it. Let all the options and all the pros and cons be set out, rather than just the preferred option, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, of the Government and the Prime Minister.

Why are the Government proposing partial privatisation? As I said earlier, it is not because we need the cash. When I met the Minister for Transport with some of my colleagues in the north-west last week, I pointed out that the explanatory memorandum suggested that the Government might get £350 million from the sale of NATS, and that a few weeks ago, the Government decided to spend £350 million to allow all over-75s a free television licence. That is exactly equivalent. My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) mentioned

[Mr. Prentice]

the air passenger tax that the previous Government introduced, which generates more than £700 million every year in revenue. Yet we are told that there is no money to invest in air traffic control. The £1 billion figure does not frighten me: over 10 years, £1 billion is £100 million a year.

When the Conservatives sold British Rail for a song, they extinguished the entire debt of £19,000 million. I shall repeat that: £19,000 million was extinguished to make British Rail attractive to the private sector. No Labour Member genuinely embraces the privatisation policy enthusiastically; the Labour party outside the House repudiates it. We have been invited to embrace it because my good friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who constantly reminds us that he espouses traditional values in a modern setting, proposed it. That may work for 99.9 per cent. of the policies that he proposes, but not for this one.

We will not get anything like £350 million when such constraints are built into the sale. We are told that partnership directors will look after the public interest and will be able to cap dividends and cut the profits that the private sector company would like to distribute. Is that an attractive proposition for the private sector?

What about the all-important 5 per cent. that is to be shared among the staff? The calculation is this: 49 per cent. for the private sector; 46 per cent. for the public sector; and in the middle, performing a balancing act, NATS employees who get a share. What will happen to the shares? I assume that, at some stage, they will be traded on the market, as BT shares were traded. One day, someone will want to buy those shares. When I raised that with my noble Friend the Minister for Transport, it was suggested—the idea was not fully worked out—that there would be a period of five or seven years during which the shares could not be traded. What happens after that period? The shares will be traded, the private sector will buy them and NATS will be privatised. I do not want that to happen; no Labour Member supports that. Conservative Members who think they have scented blood will be disappointed this evening. For me, at least, the amendment is a shot across the Government's bows. Much debate is yet to take place in Committee to ensure that, whatever argument the Government devise, NATS remains in the public sector and does not generate profit.

7.25 pm

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): I would like to say a few words about the way in which the Bill will affect Wales—and from the perspective of a Member of the National Assembly for Wales. I shall concentrate specifically on rail.

The Assembly recently debated the Government's legislative programme, and an amendment stating:

"the Assembly . . . calls on the First Secretary and the Secretary of State to seek to ensure that all Bills which impact on the functions and responsibilities of the Assembly are drafted in such a way as to permit the Assembly to implement their provisions with the maximum flexibility, and to develop policy in the areas concerned in a way which best reflects the views of the Assembly and the needs of the people of Wales".

Those words are taken from a Plaid Cymru amendment, which the Government accepted. The amended motion was supported by all Assembly Members except the Conservative group. During his contribution to the debate, the First Secretary said:

"We need to make the case for primary legislation to be framed in a way that allows us to develop policy to meet the needs of Wales."

He went on:

"this should involve the whole Assembly, not only myself and the Cabinet."

That is the answer of the government of Wales to the fact that the Assembly has no primary legislative powers. That should and will be rectified. In the meantime, however, it is important to make the current system work towards the priorities that the Assembly identifies.

It was agreed during that debate that in the new year the Assembly would agree a response to the Government's legislative programme, for submission to the Secretary of State for Wales. I assume that the response will be carefully studied and that account will be taken of the Assembly's views.

The Transport Bill is an important test of the effectiveness of the process and of the Government's willingness to respond to the views of the Assembly and the needs of Wales. Transport policy has been discussed in the Assembly in the past three weeks not only in the debate on the Queen's Speech, but in two short debates—the equivalent of Adjournment debates in this place. I initiated one of them and another, on north-south transport links, was initiated by Alun Pugh—in the Assembly, we are allowed to call Members by their names—who is Labour Assembly Member for Clwyd, West. I urge the Deputy Prime Minister and his officials to read those debates. Alun Pugh stated:

"improving north-south links is a policy objective that unites parties in the Assembly"—

I am sure that he is right about that. He also pointed to the need to overcome "the real problem" of the Assembly having

"significant powers for road but few for rail."

It is easy to understand the problems of developing an integrated transport policy under those circumstances.

The Assembly should be empowered to develop an integrated transport policy within a United Kingdom framework. The Bill provides an opportunity to empower the Assembly to do that, but it is not so empowered in the Bill as currently drafted, and it should be amended accordingly. The Scottish Parliament is given a powerful role through clauses 171, 175, 183 and 186, and has the power to direct the Strategic Rail Authority on services in Scotland. There is no such role for the Assembly. That is unsatisfactory for delivering policy objectives, and is insulting to Wales.

A high-quality north-south rail service is an example of an objective that could be more easily achieved if the Assembly had powers over rail. Another good and illuminating example that is worth studying is the ability to choose between options for relieving congestion on the M4 in the south-east and improving access to Cardiff Wales international airport. Many Members will know of the congestion on the M4 as it passes Newport and Cardiff, and two options have been touted for solving the problem: one is to invest £497 million in new roads; the other is to invest less than £400 million in rail and buses plus some road improvement, which represents a mix of investment. There are two sides to the debate, and I am

not saying that the issue is simple, but whichever side people are on, the point is that the Assembly should be able to choose. In order to choose, it should have powers in relation to rail.

What changes should we be looking for in the Bill? An amendment to section 9 of the Transport Act 1968 would enable the Assembly to become a passenger transport authority. Such bodies exist, although I believe that they may be slipping out of favour. That option would be best for Wales, as it is appropriate for a small country. Such a PTA would determine the services in Wales, the quality of rolling stock, the opening hours of booking offices and waiting rooms and possibly even fares in its area. It would enable rail policy decision making to be truly local and, through the Assembly, enable an integrated transport policy for Wales to be developed.

That idea was discussed in an Adjournment debate initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) and responded to by the then Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), who suggested that it involved making Wales, or Wales's railways, a separate entity and would lead to fragmentation. Of course that is not true: it would be no more true of Wales than it would of Birmingham, its trains and the central PTA that is linked to the wider rail network. A PTA for Wales is an option that has been called for in the Assembly by our party, Plaid Cymru; by the Liberal Democrats; and by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek), who is a Labour Member. Sue Essex, the Labour chairperson of the Local Government and Environment Committee, said that she would

"not want to be prescriptive"

about a PTA, but there should be "enabling provisions" in the Bill so that we can consider options and

"see which ones suit Wales the best".

That seems all right to me. If such provisions were included, the Assembly would be enabled to establish a PTA if it deemed that to be the best way forward, and I think that many Labour Assembly Members would support it. The Conservatives have not made their views known, but encouragingly they constantly call for policies in all areas that are tailored to the needs of Wales.

Along with the PTA and the power to establish it, it seems to us that the Assembly should receive Wales's share of the rail services subsidy, which is about £100 million. We have no way of knowing whether that total, which is pro rata for the Welsh population, is spent in Wales, and we think that there would be more investment in Wales if we received that money. Given the Government's attitude to Wales, I now have to go into the unpleasant business of bidding down, which is what King Lear did with his daughters.

I recognise that the Government are unlikely to give us that money, which is what we ought to get, so let us be a bit more pessimistic: a softer but useful option would be a Wales division of the Strategic Rail Authority. That is worth thinking about; it is the minimum necessary to enable the Assembly to influence rail policy. We are currently discussing who should appoint the Welsh member of the UK SRA, and I am glad that the Secretary of State said that there would be a Welsh member, but that is minimal provision and it is clear to us that the appointment ought to be made by the Assembly. That seems self-evident, but even that is apparently a matter of contention. Merely having that individual on the UK SRA is not enough to give us the influence that we need.

I come now to the absolute bottom line, which has been mentioned by the head of the shadow SRA as a feasible option. It is important to think carefully about it. It seems to us that there must be a clear decision to create a Wales and the Marches rail franchise for all services except inter-city services, for which it would not be appropriate. An all-Wales franchise, including the Marches, for all other services is absolutely essential. It would be easy to operate as it would dovetail with adjacent franchises and take in part of the English Marches. Such a franchise is the only way to rescue Wales's rail operations from their current franchise position on the periphery of the urban network franchises. They are little more than an afterthought—the tail-end of the existing franchises—and that simply has to be changed. *[Interruption.]* I hope that the Government will respond positively to those proposals, despite the apparent amusement that they are causing among Ministers. They represent a crucial test of the Government's attitude to devolution in Wales, which is currently the subject of considerable interest in Wales, and their decision will be carefully observed. I hope that they do the right thing.

7.36 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): It is often said that education and health are the peoples' priorities, yet each day in Britain far more people are directly affected by transport systems than have personal contact with schools or hospitals. My constituency is no exception. In Sale, trams run on the modern metrolink system, which has been referred to, and on the M56 in Wythenshawe today tens of thousands of people—many of whom will have been on their way to work—will have driven into and out of Manchester. Last year, 18 million passengers travelled through Manchester airport. Although the transport debate tends to centre on the need to get people out of cars and on to trains and buses, more than half the households in my constituency do not own a car and therefore have no choice but to use public transport. Too often, it lets them down.

The system inherited by the Government was a mess. Deregulation and privatisation created a crisis for car owners and public transport users alike. The Tory myths that public transport can be run for profit and that car use has no limits, and which have again been repeated in the debate, resulted in frustration, pollution and the waste of road congestion as well as the chaos of unreliable buses and trains. I can outdo the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) because today my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) and I endured a journey on a Virgin train that was two hours late coming to London from Manchester.

A number of improvements have been made during the first two and a half years of this Parliament. For example, the quality partnership initiative, which was developed on a voluntary basis in Manchester, has shown that it is possible to improve the quality of bus services and develop modern arrangements for ticketing and information systems. The 15 per cent. increase in rail journeys and rail freight is welcome and last week's transport settlement, which put an extra £750 million into local transport systems, reaffirmed the importance that the Government attach to local transport integration and

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long-term planning. Ministers are the first to say, however, that a great deal more needs to be done and the Bill is an important foundation for the 10-year programme that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has spoken about again today.

Having acknowledged those positive developments, I want to use the short time available to me to draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister to two particular issues, which I hope he will comment on tonight and consider further, now and in Committee. The first was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and concerns the relationship between the Strategic Rail Authority and the passenger transport authorities and executives, which cover the six metropolitan areas outside London. From the national perspective, the SRA will provide an important lead in fostering the use and development of an integrated transport system by bringing together a variety of disparate organisations in a common purpose. However, from a local perspective there is concern that under clause 215 passenger transport authorities would be subordinate to the Strategic Rail Authority, rather than in partnership with it. Under the Railways Act 1993, PTAs can specify rail service requirements for their areas. Clause 215 provides that the SRA must not carry out those requirements if they conflict with advice from Ministers—the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), may regard that as fair enough—or if that

"would have an adverse effect on the provision of services for the carriage of passengers or goods by railway (whether inside or outside the Passenger Transport Executive's . . . area)."

The Library research paper on the Bill states quite succinctly that that clause

"clarifies the hierarchy in case of contradictory requirements".

I ask my hon. Friend to consider this issue carefully. Placing PTAs at the bottom of this hierarchy runs the risk of countering the key role that they will be expected to play in the development of local transport plans.

A good example of the advantages of local co-ordination is the development of the new station at Manchester airport, which involved detailed negotiations between the PTA, Railtrack, the train operating companies and the airport—which, incidentally, was an important additional source of funding. I have genuine concerns that if the system is not built around local knowledge and relationships, such positive outcomes would be much less likely.

I believe that the best way to proceed is for Ministers to make it clear to the shadow Strategic Rail Authority and the passenger transport authorities that the Government want a strategic partnership, and to promote dialogue on that basis. PTAs cannot be given a blank cheque, but they should expect their local knowledge and experience to be taken seriously. If the Minister decides that dialogue does not work, perhaps he will consider amending the Bill to make explicit the requirement of partnership.

The second matter I wish to raise, in common with many of my hon. Friends, is the proposed new arrangements for National Air Traffic Services. I should say at this point that about 300 NATS staff work at Manchester airport in my constituency. I shall first underline those matters that are not, as far as I am concerned, in dispute: NATS has the potential to be a world leader in a fast growing market; it needs substantial new investment; much, if not all, the new money will come from the private sector; the management of NATS must start to demonstrate a greatly enhanced ability to deliver on new initiatives and services—the Secretary of State was right to point out that project management in NATS has been poor—and it simply is not true that because a service is in the private sector it is automatically unsafe.

I should like further information and some reassurance, however, on three other points. The first echoes the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr (Ms Osborne) and for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). Will the Government publish more details of their analysis of other potential models for the organisation of NATS together with the reasons for judging that the model chosen is the best available for promoting the safe and successful development of NATS as a global company? For what it is worth, I believe that the status quo would make our airspace more unsafe. It is clear that the Government have made a judgment about what they regard as the best way forward. It would be helpful to know in more detail why the proposed model is regarded as the best alternative.

Secondly, although the regulation of NATS is to remain in the public sector with the Civil Aviation Authority, what action are the Government taking to ensure that regulation goes well beyond the policing of minimal standards. Safety requires much more than just keeping the basic rules. It demands the pursuit of best practice. Will the confidential human incident reporting programme—the so-called CHIRP system of independent and confidential reporting of safety-related incidents—be retained? Will the Airprox system continue? What other proposals, if any, are under discussion? More information on how the Government will retain and enhance the safety culture in NATS would be most welcome.

Thirdly, will the Minister tell the House how he intends to prevent changes in company structure from disturbing the workplace of air traffic controllers? Anyone who has observed air traffic controllers at work will know how important it is that they are able to work in an environment devoid of any pressures other than those essentially concerned with keeping aircraft safely in the sky. As the public debate on NATS has such a high profile, it is essential that staff are reassured that their workplaces will not be disrupted.

I look forward to hearing more from the Minister on those important issues, so that with more detail there can be no room for any doubt that safety will come first as we construct a transport system that is fit for the new millennium.

7.45 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): This morning, I waited some time for my bus to take me to my constituency office. This afternoon, I waited much longer for my train. However, the House has waited a long time for this Bill. My bus and my train eventually got me to where I wanted to go, but I am not convinced that, after this long wait, the Bill will get us to where I would like the country to be in five, 10 or 15 years.

As hon. Members from both sides of the House have said, the Bill contains some good measures. I am delighted that there is a clear commitment to improving

our public transport system and our infrastructure. As some hon. Members have rightly said, there is genuine concern about whether the Government's commitment will extend to ensuring that the appropriate finances will be available. We have had the analysis of the £80 billion over 10 years that the Government have announced, and it has rightly been pointed out that that is merely a continuation of, or possibly a reduction in, current levels of funding. We have yet to see—after the next couple of years—evidence that that money will be found. When challenged on that, the Deputy Prime Minister's only commitment was to wait and see.

There are other good measures in the Bill. I am delighted about the provisions to improve the regulation of our buses. Most hon. Members acknowledge that deregulation did not work. As at least one hon. Member said, the evidence is clear. We know that, as a result of deregulation, the number of bus users was significantly reduced in most of the country. In London, where deregulation did not take place, there was a continual improvement in the number of bus users. I am pleased that bus regulation will be improved, not least through further powers to the transport commissioners and proposals for quality partnerships and quality contracts, although I hope that they will have teeth.

I hope that the Government will also include proposals, through amendment, to further regulate open-top buses, which currently operate in many of our historic cities without the regulation that I, for one, should like to see. That causes a number of problems. It is ludicrous that a tourist open-top bus can travel around an area almost empty. If it sticks to a timetable, it is entitled to the bus fuel rebate. If the rules were changed, such buses would operate only when they have passengers on board, and thereby relieve some of the congestion.

I am delighted that we will move towards concessionary fares for pensioners. Local authorities in many parts of the country already offer such concessions. At long last, the Government have promised to provide funding for that—they first promised it in June 1998, and it seems that we shall have to wait a further two years before their commitment will be delivered.

Concerns have been expressed, especially by Conservative Members, about congestion charging. I want to make it clear that the Liberal Democrats will support the Government in their moves towards the introduction of such charging.

We are delighted that the Government now recognise the importance of establishing alternative high-quality public transport options before the introduction of congestion charging. We also think it right for the Government to consider other measures to reduce the amount of congestion, by means of local transport plans. What some Members said earlier suggested that they were thinking only of congestion charging, but imaginative authorities are already investigating many other measures and, in some instances, are implementing them. Some have persuaded local firms to implement car sharing and park and ride schemes. In the case of such schemes, there is a stick as well as a carrot.

Mr. Gray: I live just outside Bath, which is one of the most congested towns that I know of. Which of the people who currently travel to Bath in their cars would the hon. Gentleman like to see off the roads?

Mr. Foster: A good many. As the hon. Gentleman says, many of my constituents are forced to suffer the real problems of congestion. Nowadays, some people will not even come into my city to use its shops because of the congestion. Many of those who come in to work could take advantage of car-sharing schemes that are already proving very successful, and are delighting many who use them. Congestion could also be reduced by the use of park and ride schemes. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have established such schemes in some parts of the outskirts of Bath, and we hope to establish more. There are schemes that are popular with people who want to work and shop in the beautiful city of Bath without having to suffer from congestion.

Along with many of his colleagues, the hon. Gentleman seems to be besotted with the idea that all we must do is allow for more and more car growth and use of cars. The long-term consequence of that would be a continuing escalation in congestion, leading to an almost solid traffic jam throughout the country. According to the CBI, congestion—apart from all the environmental and health problems that it creates—already costs business £15 billion a year. If we do not start to tackle congestion with a range of measures, that cost will continue to grow.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: Time is short, but I will allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene briefly.

Mr. Quinn: Thank you. I have listened carefully, and not once has anyone from your Benches mentioned—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene, his phraseology must be right.

Mr. Quinn: I am sorry. Let me say this through the Chair. I want to raise the issue of freight vis-a-vis congestion problems. What are your party's proposals in regard to the decisions that have been made?

Mr. Foster: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman was, in fact, addressing his question about freight through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me therefore tell you that Liberal Democrats recognise the importance of moving as much freight as possible to the railway, while also recognising that it is an impossible dream to expect all freight to travel by that means. We must consider imaginative measures, such as the use of interchanges outside cities to enable larger lorries to employ our motorways and the main routes leading to the outskirts, and the use of smaller vehicles for the purpose of that distribution.

As I have intimated, we support parts of the Bill, but we are especially concerned about the Government's proposals for National Air Traffic Services. I recently received a detailed briefing from senior management at NATS. I pay enormous tribute to all who work for NATS: they deliver a fantastic service, and a fantastically safe service, and we should all be proud of what they do. Anyway, the management made it clear that four key things were required for the future of NATS:

[Mr. Foster]

opportunities for real investment, clarity about where NATS is going, access to international markets and access to broader management skills.

The Government suggest that the only way of achieving those aims is the adoption of their proposals for a public-private partnership scheme. The House must answer this question: are there alternatives that will deliver what NATS senior management understandably wants, while also delivering what I suspect most hon. Members want—an absolute guarantee of the continuation of high-safety standards? My answer is yes. I believe that there are alternatives to be considered.

In powerful speeches, the hon. Members for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) and for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), among others, suggested that there were alternative solutions. Liberal Democrats believe that an independent publicly owned company, or a form of trust, would facilitate the right kind of investment and access to the markets. As the hon. Member for Pendle pointed out, the Government recommend PPP only because there is, they say, a problem with Treasury rules; and, as the hon. Gentleman said, the Government of the day can change Treasury rules if they wish. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman's colleagues on the Front Bench that it may not even be necessary to change the rules, because, as I think the House knows, there are other ways round the system.

Interestingly, in the case of the channel tunnel rail link the Government were prepared to make money available outside the public sector borrowing requirement, on the ground that the risk on the loan was less than 15 per cent. The House will be well aware that the risk in respect of NATS is well below that figure. Even under the current Treasury rules, it would be possible to introduce a scheme whereby, under an IPOC—independent publicly owned company—or a trust, NATS would be able to raise the necessary sums.

We are extremely concerned about the Government's plans for a PPP. Because of that, and because of other aspects of the Bill, the Liberal Democrats support the amendment, and will oppose Second Reading.

7.57 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Along with many of my hon. Friends, I support the vast majority of the Bill. I will speak briefly, because I have already had ample opportunity to express my concerns, especially over PPP for NATS.

The Bill contains many welcome measures: the good far outweighs the not so good. Who, for example, could not welcome the long-awaited establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority? Surely not my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths), my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), or any other Member who suffered—as we did in Reading, and as other communities did on the Great Western Trains line—the consequences of the terrible disaster of the Ladbroke Grove train crash. Never again do I want to see a privatised company such as Railtrack put pressure on safety investigators in the aftermath of a disaster like the Southall crash, when there was a wish to open the lines rather than getting to the core of why the disaster had occurred.

Which Member representing a constituency served—or not served—by Thames Trains would not long for the powers that the SRA will have to improve services and to require adherence to the franchise regime? Like the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), I support the introduction of measures to restrict unnecessary commuter access by cars to our overcrowded towns and cities; but, like him, I think that we should introduce the public transport infrastructure first. We cannot ask our motorists to leave their cars behind unless they have a viable alternative. The Bill paves the way for such an alternative, and I praise the Government for being brave enough to make unpopular suggestions. Ultimately, however unpopular congestion charging may prove to be, gridlock in places such as Reading, Bath and Bristol will be even more unpopular. As the Deputy Prime Minister has said time and again, doing nothing is simply not an option.

I represent a highly successful part of the Thames valley. The economy there is booming, but the price of that success is often congestion, which must be tackled—if only because asthma levels in parts of my constituency are double the national average. Young people's health is suffering as a result of congestion in major towns and cities.

One aspect of the Bill has not been referred to, but is worthy of praise and support: its provisions to ensure that some of the more lousy, mean and penny-pinching district authorities which do not have a concessionary bus fare scheme for pensioners and disabled people are forced to introduce at least a minimum service. It is a shame that that provision has not been trumpeted from the rafters—but then, if we tack air traffic privatisation to a lot of good, worthwhile measures, their impact will be lost.

I represent some 70,000 constituents, 24,000 of whom have the misfortune to come under one of those mean, penny-pinching Liberal Democrat councils. I refer to West Berkshire district council—some Members were smiling too easily then. The council offers pensioners in my constituency the princely sum of £23 in tokens. If a pensioner wants to go to the Royal Berkshire hospital to visit a loved one twice a week, his annual allocation of tokens expires after five weeks. For the other 47 weeks—whether he wants to visit someone in that hospital or elsewhere—he has to pay the full bus fare.

It is good that a Labour Government are forcing councils such as West Berkshire to deliver at least something in terms of a minimum concessionary fare. It is not as good as that provided by the Labour Reading council, but that is because Reading has the Rolls-Royce of concessionary bus fare schemes. It is more generous even than that in London. It operates not just at off peak, but at peak times. Pensioners can travel anywhere within the travel-to-work area free of charge. That is how it should be. How we treat pensioners is a mark of a civilised society.

I welcome the Bill's provisions to put local transport plans and bus service strategies on a statutory basis. Buses are crucial to the future of towns and cities and are central to any integrated transport strategy. I welcome, too—as I am sure hon. Members on both sides of the House do—the introduction of quality partnerships. Those will lay down minimum standards for bus operations and for defined routes. However, there is a problem. The Bill as drafted—I hope that Ministers are listening carefully—excludes specifically from quality partnerships the inclusion of service frequencies, hours of operation,

networks and fares. All those things are fundamental to the delivery of a bus strategy and local transport plan. It is ridiculous to have quality partnerships that allow us to discuss bus lanes, but not the buses that run along them. I urge Ministers to reconsider the scope of those partnerships.

In support of that point, and taking a fresh look at the scope of quality partnerships, I shall quote briefly from a letter from the director general of the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK to a colleague who chairs a highly successful municipal bus company. It states:

"Flexibility remains the key word. We can certainly foresee occasions when quality partnerships will contain detailed clauses on frequency, priorities for network development and general fares policy."

I implore Ministers to consider that point when the Bill is in Committee.

I come to NATS. Like my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr (Ms Osborne) and for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), I have a specific constituency interest. Like them, before the general election I made clear commitments to my constituents and I intend to honour them. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, I believe that a more detailed examination of what is proposed within PPP is necessary. Those points have been well made by other Labour Members.

I do not think that there is any real problem in securing the Government's objectives. What are they? One is to lever in private sector investment. No one has argued against that; it is not a point of ideology. Another objective is to remove the investment requirements from the public sector borrowing requirement. No Member on the Labour or Opposition Benches has argued that NATS should compete with schools and hospitals for hard-pressed public finances. My hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) mentioned that at some length.

I do not think that any Members, particularly Labour Members, would object to levering in private sector management expertise for project management and finishing off important contracts such as Swanwick. Therefore, if the objectives are not the problem, what is? It is how we achieve those objectives and convince hon. Members that all available options have been tested. For example, there is a huge question mark over the future of the 5 per cent. golden share. Whether that can be ring-fenced and whether we can for ever stop that 5 per cent. from being sold are matters of some debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle said, if it is sold, 55 per cent. will be in the private sector and, effectively, there will be privatisation of NATS.

I welcome the fact that the Bill specifically does not lay down the detail of PPP. That gives us scope for negotiation. It gives Labour Members some room for hope. I welcome the fact that air traffic controllers and pilots are in detailed discussions with Ministers. Those discussions must continue. I hope that Ministers will at some point be in a position to tell us why they do not think that the trust options are viable and why an IPOC—an independent publicly owned company, which is good enough for the Post Office—is not good enough for NATS. I have heard no convincing arguments to knock down those two options.

I, too, am attracted—initially, I was not—to the proposal from the Airline Group, the not-for-profit company. People I talk to in the industry, in which I have worked, are attracted by the wish to keep air traffic services within the industry. They want the people who are to become the strategic partners to have a financial investment in the billions of pounds of aircraft that are flying above our constituencies and that depend on the professionalism of air traffic controllers.

Only the other month, I had the opportunity to look at another model, which I have put forward to the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin). That model is the Transport Research Laboratory at Wokingham. It is quite an interesting model. When the previous Administration privatised the TRL, they, too, wanted to lever in private sector management expertise and to free it from the PSBR, but they recognised the unique nature of the TRL. It is where much transport research takes place, both for civil and military purposes. So what did they do? They set up a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, which achieved all those objectives. It produced a more dynamic private sector management and a stream of private sector investment. However, the company cannot be bought by the likes of Asil Nadir, the Hong Kong bank or anyone else who we would not want to run our air space and the planes that fly over the heads of our constituents.

The amendment has been signed by some 50 hon. Members. I know, the Government Whips know, and Ministers know that considerably more than 50 Labour Members are concerned about the proposals, but it is not the time to press the amendment to the vote. As I have said, we have ample opportunity for negotiation and to improve what is a very good Bill.

I conclude with a plea to Ministers. There is a deal out there waiting to be done. I cannot believe that any Minister worth his, or her, salt does not want to take with them in the reform of NATS the pilots and air traffic controllers, as well as the vast majority of Labour Members. The crucial issue is corporate governance. There are models that will achieve both the Government's objectives and unanimity among Labour Members.

8.10 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): It has been a fascinating debate, which began with the Secretary of State introducing the Bill with some of his traditional bluster. Behind his back—he is absent from the Chamber—we saw Labour Members throwing darts, some of which were quite sharp, whereas others had poisoned tips. Although all those Labour Members are seeking to serve on the Bill's Committee, I suspect that, because of their words and actions, they will not be on it.

Conversely, opposition party Members—particularly Conservative Members—have offered considerable expertise. We have heard, for example, from a former Secretary of State for Transport and at least two former Treasury Ministers. They have struck considerable blows to the Bill, knocking from it some dust and plenty of bluster. As such broad expertise has already been offered—on roads, trains and air transport—I shall, in a very short speech, limit myself to dealing with congestion and workplace parking charging and with the statutory bus quality partnership schemes, both of which were dealt with briefly by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor).

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said, the Government have an almost psychotic desire to control and direct—which

[Sir Paul Beresford]

explains the huge number of regulations and directions affecting both businesses and individuals. The Bill seeks to extend that control and to increase the number of controlling and interfering bodies, particularly the lord mayor and the Greater London Authority—which have, for the dubious benefit of Londoners, already been given some of the powers proposed in the Transport Bill.

As one might expect from someone with my background, I am a great supporter of local government. Equally, however, my experience makes me wary of the damage that local government is able to do. I appreciate the tendency of some people in local government to inflict damage at the first possible opportunity. In a few cases, people in local government desire to regulate and control almost to the point of seeming paranoia. The Bill will greatly extend the possibility of such damage, regulation and control.

I disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk that many local authorities will not implement the Bill's proposals, especially congestion charging. From my experience, I believe that some local authorities will be silly enough to try to implement all the programmes. The Greater London Authority, for example, has been established in such a manner that London could be damaged by a politically motivated but commercially ignorant mayor. I am greatly concerned that only one of the leading potential contenders for that extraordinary post has any real business experience, whereas the other contenders seem to have only public sector expertise—which, in some cases, is also rather dubious.

The prospect of many local authorities requiring bus operators to co-operate in quality transport schemes will allow authorities in some areas to create a complete monopoly and ensure complete control by politically driven but commercially ignorant councillors. It worries me to hear Labour Members calling for greater extension of those powers—to allow even more power for local government to control in spheres in which they have no expertise—particularly when there is a commercial aspect. Sheffield's tram scheme provides a prime example of how a financial black hole may develop, in which public money is invested to produce dubious results.

Mr. Mayor—I mean Mr. Deputy Speaker; I am sorry about that—one of the difficulties I have in talking about local government these days is that one has visions of mayors popping up all over the place, although the prospect of a London mayor is the one that really bothers me.

I recall the damage that politically motivated but commercially ignorant authorities in London did in the late 1970s. As I am speaking only briefly, I should describe a stark contrast. I remember arriving in the United Kingdom and walking down the busy streets of Westminster, which was thriving. In Camden, however, and particularly around Tottenham Court road, the atmosphere was dead. In the late 1970s, for business and shopping, the Tottenham Court road area was semi-derelict. Today, that area is thriving—but it is thriving because local government lost the power to impinge on it. Some of the Bill's proposals, in the hands of some individuals in local government, could produce the same situation that prevailed in Camden in the 1970s.

Many of our cities, including London, have good or even excellent radial public transport systems. However, few of our cities have reasonable circular systems. Although I accept that circular systems have improved considerably in the past 10 years or so, it has to be recognised that very many people have no alternative but to use a car. Furthermore, despite the Government's soothing words—even the words of an ambitious Secretary of State—there is only a small prospect of major improvements to the transport situation for those people.

Road user charging proposals, as described in the Greater London Authority Act 1999 and in the Bill, will create great difficulties for many of my constituents. My constituency is on the edge of London. Although most of my constituents live just outside the M25, many of them commute to work and to shop in, or simply to enjoy, the wonderful city of London. An irresponsible London mayor, using the powers given to him in the 1999 Act and in the Bill, could cause great damage.

When it is absolutely unfeasible for my constituents to forgo using their cars, they face increased taxation. Those who are able to use public transportation discover that the current system—which allows little circular movement around London—greatly increases the length, confusion and difficulty of their travelling day. One of our mayoral candidates has already warned us that he has plans to apply charges in the central area. He said that he would try it as a pilot scheme, with the prospect of expanding it. The scheme would probably apply charging even to residents, as it would to those who are forced to travel in or through the charge zone. Such zones evoke visions of merely moving the problem of parking congestion from the centres progressively outwards. Such movement is happening already, particularly in London, as local authorities are able to implement changes in parking systems and facilities. The zones will increasingly move outwards, affecting ever more people who wish to commute into the major cities.

Many of my constituents regularly have to go for treatment at hospitals in, for example, Epsom, Tooting and central London, but they cannot use public transport. Effectively, therefore, they will have to pay an extra cost—a fee—for the privilege of having a London mayor and for implementation of the Bill's proposals.

The Government have shown no ability to learn from the past. I therefore anticipate that implementation of those two aspects of the Bill will cause not only considerable dissatisfaction, but the greatest difficulties. Nevertheless, I imagine that the Government will plough on regardless, and that they will apply plenty of spin. However, when things go wrong with the programmes—as they will—the blame will again be laid on local government.

8.19 pm

Mr. Jim Dobbin (Heywood and Middleton): Two former Secretaries of State for Transport, now on the Opposition Benches, and my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) have referred to workplace parking charges. My former workplace, a national health service hospital, had workplace charges. Patients and visitors were charged for parking. So were doctors, nurses and other health service workers, some of them on extremely low pay. That happened during the early 1990s, under the Conservative Government.

I should like to turn to local and regional matters. I welcome the Bill, with a single reservation about the air traffic control proposals. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Hon. Members must not wander about the Chamber in front of hon. Members who are addressing the House.

Mr. Dobbin: I shall return to air traffic control later.

Transport will be a central issue at the next election. I am sure that most of my constituents will support the thrust of the Government's 10-year plan. Heywood and Middleton is split by the M60—formerly the M62—and the motorway carries traffic across the country from Liverpool to Hull as well as taking feeder traffic from the M6 and the M1. It carries a huge volume of heavy goods vehicles. The distribution park network to either side of the motorway generates many vehicle movements 24 hours a day through my local communities. That has been the result, I think, of bad land use planning decisions in the past and a failure to create direct access to and from those parks to the motorway. Some of the best attended public meetings that I have held have been about the continual noise, pollution and disturbance suffered by those communities.

I therefore support the joint working taking place for the first time between the three Departments brought together by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Consultation between those three arms should help to alleviate the type of problem that I have described. I look forward to hearing the Government's proposals for local transport plans, and the encouragement that those initiatives will offer local authorities to work together across boundaries and to agree an integrated approach to local transport within regional and national guidelines.

My constituents also complain about bus services. Will buses come in time? Will they be clean? Will they arrive at all? Such questions are especially pertinent at weekends when evening services are few and far between. Bus deregulation and the competitive battle that followed caused confusion. There was a lack of information, and there was certainly a reduction in quality. Greater involvement by local authorities is absolutely essential. Local traffic plans could and would have immense influence on ticketing policies, traffic information and the environment.

I make a plea for an early decision by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the extension of metrolink to include the Oldham-Rochdale link and links in other parts of Greater Manchester. Metrolink has been a tremendous success in helping to reduce car journeys in and around Greater Manchester. It has been proven to work. If combined with developments at Manchester airport, where forecasts of increased employment and economic growth are extremely good, metrolink and improved bus services would work together to form a strong integrated approach to transport. Manchester airport is, incidentally, a public sector airport, owned by local authorities. It also has borrowing powers, a point referred to by other hon. Members.

On a recent visit to Switzerland with the all-party rail freight group, I saw systems for transferring freight from road to rail. I look forward to a growth in strategically placed rail terminals throughout the country, as that would go some way to resolving heavy goods vehicles problems in local communities. I am aware that grant funding exists, but wish that local authorities and other bodies were encouraged to take it on board. It never ceases to amaze me that we in the United Kingdom often have difficulty achieving planning agreement for the imposition of double yellow lines or "Give Way" signs, while in Switzerland, tunnels are being driven through the Alps. That shows the difference of approach.

I look forward to new and imaginative transport policies. I am enthusiastic about the Government's proposals for local integrated transport. However, I am not convinced by their proposals on air traffic control. The primary issue is passenger safety. I have never been convinced by the commercial sector's response to safety. Experience down the years, from the mines being put into private ownership to the North sea ferry tragedies and the Paddington rail crash, shows an unwillingness in the private sector to prioritise safety over profit. In *The Guardian* today, I read that the Government have accused the nuclear power industry of endangering safety to save money by getting rid of staff. In recent days, the water regulator has instructed water authorities to reduce prices, and the industry has responded by announcing staff cuts that will, in my view, endanger water quality.

I remain to be convinced that even partial privatisation of air traffic control would not follow a similar course. History tells us that it would. However, I shall not vote against the Government tonight as I want to hear more detail from the Secretary of State on the matter. My right hon. Friend and the Minister of Transport have placed the matter at the top of their agenda, and there is time to reconsider it.

Finally, I should like the Secretary of State to consider extending Eurostar to the north-west, which would be a tremendous boon to the whole north of England. I want the transpennine rail networks to develop, as that would complete the transport integration policies that I want to see in the north of England.

8.28 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): Perhaps I should start by declaring an interest, as a director of a retail store which has ample free parking for customer and staff alike.

Despite having been exposed to the Government's breathtaking arrogance and cynical deceit for more than two long years, I was still flabbergasted to read in the Government's annual report for 1998-99 that they had successfully developed an integrated transport policy. Whom are they kidding? Where is it? Is this supposed to be it? Having listened to Lord Macdonald on the radio this morning, I can say that their policy is rapidly disintegrating.

I suppose that we should at least be grateful that at last, after two and a half years, the Government have got round to introducing a Transport Bill. Their obsession with spin in this case has made them look ridiculous. Millions of people every day are confronted by the reality of congested roads, overcrowded trains and, in London, an extremely busy and increasingly strained tube network. People want solutions to problems, not the strangulated hyperbole of the Deputy Prime Minister. According to a recent opinion poll, the majority of respondents thought that transport would never improve under the Government's policies.

[Mr. John Randall]

We realise that the problems are huge; they have not materialised overnight and solving them will not be easy. My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) reminded us that we have some of the most congested roads in western Europe. The problems vary depending on where people live in Britain—in an urban, suburban or rural environment.

The Labour party spent 18 years telling the country how awful transport was under those evil Conservatives, but precious little time thinking about how they would solve the problems. Perhaps they were too busy telling us that they would not sell our air, while getting the sale tickets ready.

Before the election, the Labour party promised immediate changes. Two and a half years later, the Deputy Prime Minister has put that back to 10 years. It will also become increasingly difficult for the House to monitor what progress the Government will make when an unelected peer has been put in the driving seat of the Government's transport policy. That transport policy has seen the expenditure of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on main transport programmes fall by 24 per cent. over the period 1996-97 to 1998-99, at a time when public frustration and impatience are growing daily.

The gulf between the Government's promises and their achievement is also widening daily. I am sure that Downing street cannot wait for the new year, so that this year—the year of delivery—can be forgotten. If the Government were in business, they would be paying the electorate compensation for their lamentable failure.

I should like to express my genuine sympathy for the Deputy Prime Minister. I believe that he is sincere in his aim of improving the transport system but he has been isolated and ignored by the Prime Minister. The poor old Deputy Prime Minister has effectively been torpedoed and is now holed below the water-line. All we can do is watch as he slowly and inexorably sinks from our sight.

I have a number of general remarks about the Bill. Naturally, with regard to my constituency of Uxbridge—which is in London but happily still not run by London—some of its provisions on road pricing and workplace charging have already been covered by the Greater London Authority Act 1999. Sadly, we were denied the opportunity of properly debating the issues by a guillotine motion imposed by this increasingly authoritarian and non-democratic Government. However, the issues of principle and the problems of implementing such schemes are identical, so I shall be discussing some of the implications of these measures.

First, however, I turn to the part of the Bill that deals with the future of National Air Traffic Services. I have an interest in this because the air traffic control centre, although in the neighbouring constituency of the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), is on my doorstep, and many NATS employees live in my constituency. Apart from that, I hardly need mention that a huge amount of air traffic passes over the area daily.

Many NATS employees have contacted me expressing strong reservations about the plans in the Bill. Naturally, safety is their primary concern, as I suggest it is for all hon. Members. This part of the Bill separates the Civil Aviation Authority from NATS. The CAA will remain fully in the public sector while the status of NATS changes through the public-private partnership. I do not want to get distracted by whether full-scale privatisation or PPP is the best mechanism for providing NATS with its future funds for investment, but I would like to draw the Minister's attention to the effectiveness of the safety regime under the new arrangements.

A constituent of mine who works for NATS in West Drayton wrote to me with details of a case that had been drawn to his attention by a member of his staff. This engineer had joined NATS from a privately run airport which was separately regulated. He was the only engineer for the whole airport and had to repair and maintain all the tower systems and the instrument landing system. During work on the latter, he was instructed to falsify the maintenance documentation so that the safety regulator would not demand expensive, but necessary, flight testing. The company in question is one of the proposed bidders for NATS. My constituent's concern—one shared by Members on both sides of the House who have reservations as to this part of the Bill—is how we can ensure that safety is in no way compromised by the separation of NATS from the CAA.

The matter is of such importance that the Government should have dealt with the proposals for NATS in a separate Bill. They must listen to these concerns, and must be aware that public opinion shows that there are serious doubts as to the wisdom of their policy.

Mr. Dalyell: I do not want the hon. Gentleman to go into the details of that important case on the Floor of House, but has he passed them to the Government?

Mr. Randall: I have not done so at present.

I have much sympathy with the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang). However, if I found myself in the company of the amendment's supporters in the Lobby tonight, not only would it put them off but I should soon become the target of dubious enticements by the Labour party.

Under the Bill, local transport plans and bus strategies will become a statutory responsibility for all local authorities. The authorities

"must develop and implement policies for the promotion and encouragement of safe, integrated, efficient and economic transport facilities and services to, from and within their area."

That is where we see how cowardly the Government are. We are told that they are serious about reducing road traffic—or rather, they were. As we now know, they have abandoned that policy and have gone into reverse at speed. The Bill is yesterday's Bill. It seems that the Government have realised that congestion charging will be too unpopular and workplace parking charging will be wholly unworkable, so they are washing their hands of the measures. They say, "It's not our job." Local authorities will be left to implement the measures, if they are implemented at all. That will mean that one local authority will be in direct conflict with another; businesses will be forced to migrate from authority to authority like herds of wildebeest on the plains of the Serengeti. That is not an integrated measure.

Workplace charging will not deter motorists; it will only add to their misery. Motorists will either have to pay out yet again, or will clog up streets and residential areas.

It is continually said—but it remains fundamental to trying to solve the problem of traffic congestion—that public transport must be dramatically improved. The quality and efficiency of the service, and its price, are of the utmost importance. Sadly, the Government are unwilling to provide real money to deal with the problem, which only gets worse by the day. The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs report on the White Paper pointed out that, without spending money up front on improvements to public transport before the introduction of charges, the schemes will be seen by many motorists as yet another attack on the driver. The need for consultation will ensure that local authorities have difficulty in introducing charges against a backdrop of popular opposition.

Why have the Government suggested only a 10-year period for hypothecation? Does that mean that, after 10 years, the charges will become yet another tax on the hard pressed driver?

This morning, I heard Lord Macdonald admit on the "Today" programme that the Government had suddenly realised that their policy of last week was flawed. I found it slightly strange to hear the Minister express a desire to see more cars on the roads, although nothing about the Government much surprises me now. The Bill will do little to improve the lot of the travelling public. If the Deputy Prime Minister and his Department had the courage of their convictions on congestion charging and its efficacy, they would not have passed the buck—of sorting out the matter—to local authorities.

To a great extent, the Deputy Prime Minister's hands have been tied by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. We know that that is why the Bill was delayed for so long. The Deputy Prime Minister is being lined up as the eventual fall guy for the Government's transport failures. The Bill is deeply flawed; by the Government's admission, it passed its sell-by date before even reaching the shops. I suggest that the Government take it away and put some real thought into it before they bring it back. I might then be able to support it. At present, I shall have no problem in opposing Second Reading.

8.39 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): Two matters of significance have emerged from the past few hours of debate. The first is that although, as those of us with long memories recall, integrated transport policy has been mentioned many times over the years, we have never before had a Secretary of State—as we have now, in the form of the Deputy Prime Minister—with the determination and courage to define "integrated transport policy". My right hon. Friend is therefore to be congratulated on having the courage and determination to introduce the Bill.

The other thing that is of significance, against the background of congestion costing the country some £20 billion a year, and of an anticipated increase in traffic over the next 10 years of some 30 per cent.—that is another 8 million vehicles on the road—is the mixed message that we have heard from Conservative Members. The do-nothing brigade have said, "Just let things continue as they are". Then we had that notable speech by the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), setting out what is best described as a blancmange policy of extra capacity—not thought out, and without costings or details. That is the sort of argument that the Conservative party has asked the House to take seriously tonight.

In the time available, I want to comment on the four parts of the Bill and make some suggestions that I hope that my hon. Friends the Ministers can act on.

I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) and others, who have implied that because there will be a duty on local authorities, local transport plans are, first, a Government abdication of responsibility and, secondly, bound to end in disaster. I see the passing of responsibility to local authorities as a strength, because it is ludicrous that there could be a national integrated transport policy, decided in Whitehall and passed on to local authorities to implement. The strength of the proposals in the Bill is the recognition that if an integrated transport policy is to work—and, my goodness, we now have the best chance in generations to make such a policy work—it must involve differing solutions in different parts of the country. It makes perfect sense for local transport plans to be the bedrock of such a policy, within a national framework.

However, I remain to be convinced on quality partnerships for buses. I am one of those who supports quality contracts. I like to see franchises. Quality contracts will give local authorities the teeth to ensure that bus operators live up to their contractual terms. They would also provide a golden opportunity to bring education transport—a massive area of transport need, which uses a massive amount of resources—within the ambit of quality contracts. Education transport is left out of quality partnerships.

The other aspect of quality partnerships that bothers me is that while there is an agreement between bus operators and a local authority, a local authority has no means to prevent a bus operator from withdrawing a service. The operator need give only 40 days' notice and withdraw it, and the quality partnership starts to be adversely affected.

Three very important points need to be made about road user charging and workplace parking charging. The first has already been mentioned. The idea has been advanced by the official Opposition that such charging is the only shot in the locker—the only measure that local authorities will have with which to affect positively the terrible congestion that we are facing now, which is likely to grow. That is nonsense. A whole range of options is available to local authorities and managing road space is one of them. To try to give the impression—I think that Conservative Members have failed—that the proposal declares war on the motorist is abject nonsense.

It is important, however, that the Government recognise the importance of three points. First, if we are to achieve public acceptance of what will be an unpopular and controversial measure, there must be broad consultation. Secondly, resources will have to be made available up front. The Government will have seriously to consider allowing local authorities to borrow on the basis of future income streams so that public transport alternatives are in place at least at the same time as, or preferably before, workplace and road charging are introduced. Thirdly, I endorse a point that has already been made. The 10-year hypothecation period seems to be too short. We should think in terms of at least 15 years and probably longer. The issues are long term. Changes will not happen overnight or even in the five-year period that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned.

[Mr. George Stevenson]

I enthusiastically welcome the proposal for a Strategic Rail Authority. I say to those who voted against the proposal for a Strategic Rail Authority on the Second Reading of the Railways Bill, who opposed its consideration in a Select Committee and who have expressed their opposition again tonight, that every private company in the railway industry supports the establishment of such an authority. Conservative Members believe that they know what is best, but they are against the united opinion of every company in the railway sector.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman is a member of the Transport Sub-Committee and he knows full well that I did not dismiss out of hand the principle of a Strategic Rail Authority. However, I wish to make a simple point. Every one of the companies that the hon. Gentleman mentioned thinks, "My goodness—anybody but the present Secretary of State running the railways." They are looking for someone with sense and who can bring parties together to help the railways to operate better. Instead, the Secretary of State just criticises and shouts at the railway companies.

Mr. Stevenson: I have only 15 minutes in which to speak, so I wish that I had not wasted the past 30 seconds with the hon. Gentleman's intervention. Indeed, one of the major transport operators in the country, Stagecoach, wanted the Government to go even further and to give the Strategic Rail Authority more power than it will have. We can give an enthusiastic welcome to the establishment of the authority.

Mr. Quinn: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Stevenson: I am trying to calculate how much longer I have left to speak; I think that I can give way.

Mr. Quinn: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. Is he aware of the statement by Railtrack, which welcomed the establishment of a Strategic Rail Authority? Railtrack is geared to working closely with the SRA and it looks forward to the authority gaining its full powers. It states:

"The strategic overview which the SRA will provide will be helpful and we welcome the clarification of"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is trying to make a mini speech.

Mr. Stevenson: My hon. Friend simply endorses the point that I made earlier.

I draw attention to an important point. If we consider Railtrack's investment particularly in the first three years of its existence, the way that it is moving away at a rate of knots from its commitment to expanding freight facilities and the way that it is trying to develop a scare scenario by suggesting that improvements to the west coast main line will cost three times more than it originally envisaged, it appears that it is trying to make the case that it will not be able to invest in the way that we want to invest unless the Government are prepared to put in more money. If that happens, serious consideration must be given to how the public interest will be protected in that scenario.

I turn now to the proposals for National Air Traffic Services. In a recent sitting of the Select Committee, the chief executive of NATS, Mr. Bill Semple, was asked whether he could name any country that has privatised its air traffic control system. His immediate answer was, "Yes." The next question was, "Which?" His reply was, "Fiji." The chief executive of NATS seriously stated that Fiji is an important factor in his support of the proposals. That is ludicrous.

The next question was why all other countries, including the United States, had not embraced privatisation of their air traffic control services. It was suggested that perhaps they did not have the courage—as presumably the Government are suggesting that they themselves have—to break the mould. That may be so, but the notion that those countries have not had the courage to break the mould seems worthy of consideration. However, it may be that all those countries had considered privatisation, and rejected it. I suspect that the latter possibility is the more likely. Those countries must therefore have come up with models that meet all the objectives that the Government desire, while retaining the public control that is necessary in the public interest.

I shall support the Government tonight, but they have a lot more arguing to do on the NATS proposals before they will convince many Labour Members that they have got it right. We shall be watching extremely carefully to see what consideration the Government will give to ensuring that the objectives that they have, rightly, set for the future of NATS are achieved without going down what many of us consider, for many reasons, to be a dangerous road.

8.53 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am delighted to contribute to the Second Reading debate on this Bill, which has been long awaited and heralds the Government's much-promised policies. I declare an interest in that I am married to a British director of a prominent American airline company, and I sit on the Royal Automobile Club public policy committee, which carries certain privileges.

I regret that the Bill is too ambitious and that the Secretary of State will find it impossible to deliver. In summing up the Bill, we can liken it to the Secretary of State himself: it is good-natured but long-winded and incoherent. I am unable to support the Bill and regret that the Government have not introduced four separate Bills to which the House could have done full justice.

I regret also the way in which the Secretary of State has personally been undermined by the appointment of a powerful Minister for Transport in another place. The fact that the Minister is not accountable to the House is deeply regrettable. The man who is entrusted with the Government's 10-year transport programme is unable to be questioned by, and held to account in this Chamber.

Mr. Gray: Is it not odd that the Minister for Transport is the fourth Scot to fulfil that role? Scottish transport matters are decided in Edinburgh, and decisions on English roads are being made by a Scotsman.

Miss McIntosh: As my hon. Friend will realise, I have no hesitation in welcoming the fact that Scots are being promoted.

I want to place on record that I am about to make a robust attack on the Government policies set out in the Bill. To those who are interested in the current hotbed of attacks and counter-attacks, I say that this lady is not for turning, and I am not about to cross the Floor of the House. I hope to make many more, similar speeches from these Benches.

I turn to the part of the Bill that deals with National Air Traffic Services, establishing a public-private partnership with a strategic private sector partner. Why did the Government feel incapable of a simple flotation, with a remaining golden-share issue to secure permanent United Kingdom control? The proposal amounts to semi-privatisation, which is regrettable and, for that reason, unacceptable. It is a halfway house: a semi-detached NATS rather than a privatised one with a golden share.

I have the privilege to serve on the Transport Sub-Committee of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, under the capable and amiable chairmanship of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). She has placed on record in this debate her personal opposition to the proposed PPP for NATS. I note the omission of her name among the 50 Members supporting the amendment, headed by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang). She finds herself in excellent and assorted company. Her opposition is undoubtedly a source of deep embarrassment for the Government. We look to the Minister to respond to that embarrassment.

I turn to part II on local transport plans and buses. The Government have said on a number of occasions in this Chamber that the number of bus routes has increased this year. That is simply not true. In Vale of York, we are at least one bus route short from the beginning of the year. It was a crucial route: it was the first to be withdrawn, initially in February. Following complaints from several constituents, which I supported, it was reinstated, only to be taken away again at the end of the summer. The route was from Haxby Wiggington to the city of York, stopping at the hospital, the station and the theatre. I plead with the Government to ensure that, under them, one's first bus is not one's last.

Continuing with the transport analogy, the Government must not put the cart before the horse. If they are to be truly ambitious about greater passenger use of public transport, investment in improved public transport services must precede congestion charging or workplace parking levies. We await the winding-up speech to hear whether the Government will announce such a commitment and honour that obligation.

Government policies in practice, and current local transport plans in particular, do not inspire confidence. Let us take another example from Vale of York. The latest park and ride scheme is to be removed from its existing site on Clifton Moor business park, which is ideal. Drivers are currently invited to park their cars and visit shops on the business park, which many do, before taking the bus into York and therefore ease congestion. Many pedestrians also take the bus for convenience.

Let us contrast the present site with the newly constructed park and ride scheme on greenbelt land—yes, greenbelt land in Vale of York, confirming the Deputy Prime Minister's promise that Labour created the green belt and now wants to build on it—at Rawcliffe on the A19. The site is close to the most congested roundabout on the outskirts of York. Those living in Rawcliffe do not welcome the scheme, and those living in Clifton Moor regret the impending loss of their park and ride site, as they now have to start their cars in order to take the bus. Those living in Skelton and Shipton are horrified to learn that the congestion and tailbacks on to the A19 from the Rawcliffe roundabout in their direction are likely hugely to increase.

Rather than relieving congestion and increasing the scope and use of public transport, the park and ride scheme will increase congestion and result in fewer people using public transport in Vale of York. That ingenious yet somewhat surprising policy was the brainchild of Labour's flagship council—none less than City of York unitary authority. What does that tell us about Labour's public transport policy?

I shall address briefly part III, which deals with road charges and the workplace parking levy. As I mentioned, I have the honour to work with the RAC on its public policy committee. It has raised fundamental points, which I invite the Government to take on board.

In the RAC's view, the motorist must be convinced that road pricing is a charge, not a tax; otherwise, the concept will be unacceptable and unviable. For the Government to make that distinction between charges and taxes, motorists must be persuaded that there are publicly endorsed objectives and convinced of the transparency of the operation, spending hypothecation and the additionality of revenues raised.

If trunk road charging is introduced, charges must not be set at such a level as to encourage diversion from the most used or preferred route. Public transport in many towns and cities—including York, part of which falls in my constituency—cannot cope with the existing number of peak-time commuters, so it would be unfair to charge motorists before improving public transport. We await a decision early next year from the European Court of Justice on the question of imposing VAT on congestion charging and tolls. Do Ministers accept that revenues derived from those VAT charges should be fully hypothecated into local transport?

The Secretary of State has said that safety is and will remain of paramount importance. One can only assume that safety is of equal importance in all sectors, including rail transport. However, in their response to the Select Committee report on the Railways Bill, the Government state:

"The review of transport safety arrangements which the Government initiated in response to the Committee's earlier recommendations is nearing completion."

Only when it is completed will the Government address

"the case for unified, independent arrangements for safety regulation and accident investigation."

The Government are non-committal as to which functions will fall to a new authority. I hope that the Minister will give an assurance that a single body will assume overall responsibility for transport safety in the rail sector. We do not want safety in the industry to become fragmented between a plethora of organisations, including the Strategic Rail Authority, the railways regulator, Railtrack, the Health and Safety Executive and the new safety authority. The public want to know which body is to have ultimate responsibility for rail safety.

The Bill must ensure the independence of the British Transport police from Railtrack and the train operating companies: the independence of BTP officers must be

[Miss McIntosh]

beyond doubt. Finally, I ask that the promised regional Eurostar services from York, Newcastle and Edinburgh direct to Paris and Brussels be introduced at the earliest possible opportunity. Because of the Government's actions or omissions, and because four full Bills have been crammed into one, I am unable to support the Bill and will oppose it this evening.

9.3 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am grateful to have an opportunity to speak, and glad to follow the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), with whom I work on the RAC public policy committee. I do that in a voluntary capacity.

This is a landmark Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said, it is the first major transport Bill for 30 years. It will put right years of Tory neglect of Britain's transport system. It follows and builds on the details set out in the integrated transport White Paper, which has now been put in the context of a 10-year transport strategy. The policies it contains contrast sharply with the predict-and-provide policies of the previous Administration.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), who pointed out Opposition Members' lack of reference to the environment. It is staggering that Conservative Members barely mentioned the importance of transport in improving our environment. Hon. Members know that that greatly concerns our constituents, especially young people. We cannot do anything about the environment without considering our transport system, which is what the Bill tries to do.

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Conservative party's suggestions about motorway tolling would severely damage the environment by driving traffic through villages and areas of natural beauty?

Ms Winterton: I agree, although it was surprising to hear any proposals from the Conservatives: on the whole, they merely attacked ours without making any constructive ones of their own.

The Bill contains radical forms of financing, including public-private partnership. Many comments were made about that by Government and Opposition Members and I am sure that the discussions will continue in Committee. Another radical form of financing is hypothecation from congestion and workplace parking charges. The direct expenditure of money from those charges on improving public transport in local areas is welcome. That comes on top of the announcement on fuel duty, whereby money raised over and above inflation will go directly into a fund for transport. That is good news for Britain's transport system.

As I said, I serve in a voluntary capacity as a member of the RAC's public policy committee. The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) talked about some of what the AA has been saying. The RAC surveys many thousands of motorists every year. Those surveys show clearly that there is a consensus among motorists that the real anti-car policy is to do nothing about congestion.

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham): Does my hon. Friend agree that the important thing about local transport plans and the options given on congestion charging or using of roads in a different way is that local people and organisations can decide the best solutions for their areas?

Ms Winterton: I agree and will say more about that. The Conservatives seem completely incapable of understanding that, possibly because of their attitude to local government when they were in power.

Motorists know that the forecast increase in car growth and the need to tackle environmental problems mean that something must be done. That is why the principle of hypothecation established in the Bill is so important. Motorists have reservations about congestion charging. That is shown by the RAC surveys. However, most motorists support congestion charging provided that the money raised is put back directly into improving public transport.

There is also clear evidence, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), that if motorists are subject to congestion charging, they will seriously consider alternatives such as car sharing, so that they use cars less. Many motorists have said that they would consider other forms of transport if public transport were improved.

It is important—this was one of the RAC's concerns, and was highlighted in the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Mr. Clark)—that there should be thorough consultation when local transport plans are drawn up, particularly if congestion charging is proposed.

Many of the Government's policies have concentrated on ensuring that the local community is consulted when the local authority draws up plans. That is important in ensuring local support for any changes that take place. I hope that during the passage of the Bill, Ministers will make it clear that they expect there to be thorough consultation by local transport authorities. Perhaps they will suggest how such consultation should take place, and the guidance that might be issued; for example, local disability groups should be included. I have previously raised some of the concerns of the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

It is right that the Government have given local authorities the power to raise money locally for the improvement of public transport.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that when congestion charging schemes are discussed as part of that consultation process, it is important that they should have credibility, and that, if they are to have credibility, it is likely that there will need to be a clear relationship between car use and charging? Various organisations and bodies have drawn attention to the relative merits of a congestion charging scheme based on entering certain areas—as opposed, for example, to a workplace parking scheme.

Ms Winterton: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's comments, and I shall offer some suggestions in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) spoke about the importance of planning at national level. It is also important that planning goes on at local level—particularly a strategic look at the needs of the local community and how those needs can be met. In my area of South Yorkshire, even 10-year-olds talk about the days when the South Yorkshire transport system

was healthy, before the Tories destroyed it. I believe that local authorities can be imaginative and forward-thinking in their proposals. Those can be popular locally, contrary to comments from the Opposition.

The Bill restores to local authorities the ability to be imaginative and forward-looking. Transport authorities can learn from each other. There should be a facility for exchanging best practice. I hope that Ministers will assist with that. Where local authorities have taken radical steps that have improved public transport, it would be helpful if other authorities were given information about that and encouraged to adopt similar policies.

I should like to make a suggestion, which follows on from the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden): it might be useful for organisations such as the Motorists Forum, which the Government set up, to work alongside the RAC and the AA to examine local transport plans that have improved life for the motorist and have proved most effective, so that we can follow the best examples.

Integration is the key to local transport plans. Bringing together provision for car, bus and rail users is important. The quality bus partnerships and the quality contracts that the Bill proposes will help to end the years of misery that deregulation has caused, leaving many people in constituencies such as mine isolated and without access to the services that they need.

Railways are an important part of making a properly integrated transport system work. I welcome the establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority, but I want to underline the points that my hon. Friends the Members for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) made about the concerns of PTAs, and especially their relationship with the SRA in setting priorities. We need to ensure that there is no conflict between the priorities of the PTAs and those of the SRA; any locally devised plan should bring those priorities together.

My constituency is in the centre of Doncaster, a town that was run down by the previous Government. Once a thriving industrial town, it now qualifies for objective 1 status as one of the poorest regions in Europe. In my constituency, 40 per cent. of people do not have access to a car. It is important to make good public transport a priority in my constituency if we are to create the regeneration that is necessary to get the area back on its feet and to get people back to work. Business has welcomed the moves to improve public transport—it realises that that is good for it—and my constituents will welcome the Bill because it will improve their quality of life in the next millennium.

9.18 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is a privilege to follow two hon. Ladies who are members of the RAC public policy committee. I must admit that I agree more with one than with the other, although I congratulate the other—the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton)—on the excellence of her timekeeping.

Before the general election, Labour's transport document promised immediate benefits for the travelling public. Since the Opposition day debate a week ago, however, we have discovered that we are considering not immediate benefits to the travelling public but, as the Deputy Prime Minister suggested, a 10-year plan. The benefit for the Government is that, by the time of the next general election, we will not know whether they have delivered. In 1999—the year of delivery—they have certainly not delivered on transport.

Let me quote from a recent transport debate:

"Under the present Government, transport policy is in chaos. Road budgets have been slashed. Investment . . . slashed . . . the Government are lining up new taxes for the motorist. A congestion tax is coming soon . . . The truth is that the Government are anti-motorist, but have no credible public transport policy to offer in its place . . . We are wholly against the policies that the Government are pursuing."—[*Official Report*, 15 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 623-24.]

That was said not by a Conservative transport guru but by a Labour Member of Parliament: none other than the honourable—I use the word loosely—Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), who was right about transport, although I disagree with him on so many other subjects.

The Labour Government have not even begun to deliver on transport: their approach is fundamentally flawed and gives a fascinating glimpse into the realities of new Labour thinking. It is all about central planning and the state knowing best: "We've got an integrated transport White Paper. We are clever fellows. We know all about it Do what we tell you and you'll be all right." That is exactly what Labour did to the economy under Wilson and Callaghan—central government and telling the people what they want. What works in transport terms is providing the travelling public with the services they want and the comfort they demand at a price they can afford. The market does that, not central planning, which is where Labour is wrong.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I am terribly sorry, but I have only five minutes in which to speak.

The second fundamental flaw in Labour's transport policy is that the Government are saying not, "Here is what we shall do to make transport better," but, "Here are the things that we shall not allow you to do, even if you want to do them." That particularly applies to cars. Why are petrol prices going through the roof and why are the Government introducing congestion charging and workplace taxes? It is not because motorists want to get off the road but to get motorists off the road. They are saying to motorists who want to use their cars for perfectly legitimate tasks, "You may not use them and we will tax you to make sure that you don't." They are interfering with the freedom of individuals to do what they could reasonably want to do.

Who will the measures affect? Not the fat cats, not company car drivers and not Ministers zipping around in their limos, but those who can least afford to pay for them. Let me quote a Labour professor, Professor Grant, who is a leading expert in car pollution at the university of Warwick:

"Even if you remove the vehicles from the road, others often appear in their place. People assume that the congestion has gone and use their cars again."

Congestion charging not only affects those who can least afford to pay for it but does not work. If it did work and we managed to clear the roads by that means, what would happen? People would come back on to the roads. I suggest that congestion charging represents entirely

[Mr. Gray]

flawed and entirely wrong thinking and is a way of finding more revenue for the Treasury. It is all about the Government saying, "We know best and we are going to mess you lot out there around so that you'll do what we want you to do."

The same applies, but in another way, to the Strategic Rail Authority. The Government are saying, "Right, let's not leave it to Richard Branson and other business men to make money from providing decent transport; let's set up a centralised quango to dictate to the companies and tell them what we want them to do and how we will restrict them. My goodness, Mr. Branson! Make a profit? How awful. Labour does not like profits—no, no, no. We will restrict your profits as much as we possibly can so that you cannot invest or make money from providing a decent service for the people who travel on your trains."

The same applies, in a funny way, to the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services. Again, the Government will not allow the market to have its say. They will not allow NATS to make a profit and will not allow people to say, "Fine, let's make money and let those in the City invest in air traffic control so that we can make a profit from it." They say, "Oh no, we'll come up with a botched job. We shall do our best to produce something that looks a bit like privatisation. We will buy off the left wingers on our Back Benches, with something that is not truly a privatisation." The same applies to buses.

Labour's whole approach to transport is to centralise, dictate to the people and say, "We know best." In two and a half years in power it has made a mess of transport, which has been taken out of the Secretary of State's hands. We are glad about that because one thing is for sure: the Minister for Transport cannot make a worse mess than he has.

9.23 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) for those concluding remarks from the Back Benches because he has summed up the fundamental flaw in the Government's thinking, but I have enjoyed the whole debate and am grateful to all those who have taken part. It is notable that, apart from the speech of the hon Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), every Labour Back-Bench contribution has contained at least some criticism of the Bill, which makes a change. I have no doubt, however, that, as in the previous transport debate, the Government will win and think that they have achieved a great triumph, but we will have created confusion and dispute among them. We will have undermined the credibility of the Secretary of State and, like last time, we shall find that transport has been hypothecated to the other place.

This is the wrong Bill at the wrong time and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) rightly said, in a civilised Parliament its provisions would merit four Bills. Here are 258 pages, but where is the beef?

We are told that the Government will announce another 10-year plan of £80 billion investment. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) said, £80 billion is a modest sum compared with the amounts raised and invested by the previous Conservative Government.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) asked, where is the new capacity that the Bill was to provide, because it contains no provision for increased capacity? As for an integrated transport policy, my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) reminded us of the immortal words that often appear in *Private Eye*, "Er—that's it." That is the Government's policy.

Mr. Prescott: That's it?

Mr. Jenkin: That is the question that we are asking, and the right hon. Gentleman might muse on that.

Is an integrated transport policy really represented by local transport plans? They put more compulsory burdens on local authorities and offer more bureaucracy and more guidance from the Secretary of State.

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): Rubbish.

Mr. Jenkin: Who said rubbish?

Mr. Heppell: I did.

Mr. Jenkin: If the hon. Gentleman reads the Bill, he will see that it says that the authorities must do this and local authorities must do that. It imposes further obligations that will cost money and produce nothing. Local transport plans are already undertaken by responsible authorities voluntarily, and that is what should happen.

Is bus re-regulation the sum total of an integrated transport policy? I am not referring to the idea of quality partnerships in clause 96, which have some merit. I do not want to discomfit the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), who is not in his place, but I think that quality partnerships should be allowed to determine the frequency and timing of services. I hope that he will consider our amendment when we get to that clause.

The question of quality contracts is covered in 11 clauses of bus re-regulation. We are going back to the town hall monopolies, excluding operators from competing on routes on which they may have been operating for some time. That is the path back to reduced efficiency and higher cost.

Let us have the truth about bus deregulation. As the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) said, the decline in bus ridership was much faster before than after bus deregulation. In the 10 years prior to bus deregulation, the average annual decline in bus ridership was 1.2 per cent., and the Government inherited a decline of just 0.3 per cent. It remains to be seen whether the Government's policies add anything to bus ridership in the long term.

Throwing money at the problem may produce visible effects, but the rural bus partnership scheme is an expensive policy. In my county, the price ranges from £14 to £162 per passenger journey on one of the bus services in my constituency. That does not seem a wise allocation of resources.

It was interesting that the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East said that bus ridership continued to hold up after bus deregulation. I noticed that his phone rang at that point, which suggests that someone was trying to tell him that he was off-message.

Do congestion and car park taxes constitute an integrated transport policy? My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) asked who will pay these taxes and who will be exempt, and my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Cambridgeshire asked how much the charge will be. How high does it need to be to produce a reduction in congestion? The Minister should answer that question, because the Secretary of State failed to do so. That is one of the conditions that the CBI attaches to its support for this policy. What should the limits to the charge be, what is the administrative cost, what will be the burdens on business and what will be the effect on the value of properties? Forcing people out of their cars before alternatives are in place is the Government's policy. They have decided to give the dirty work to local authorities, because they know how unpopular their policy will be, and are determined not to carry the can. I give the House this pledge: we will nail the Government with the unpopularity of their policies.

We endlessly hear the new word recently invented, or discovered, by the Secretary of State—hypothecation. The Secretary of State does not understand the difference between hypothecation and additionality. He has been given no guarantees by the Treasury about the baseline transport funding on which local authorities depend.

Mr. Prescott: Watch this space.

Mr. Jenkin: Let us watch the spaces that the right hon. Gentleman has been filling and vacating recently. He announced, with great panache and all the usual Labour spin, last week's £750 million transport supplementary grant and credit approval settlement. In fact, the grant constituted only 1.8 per cent. of the settlement; a staggering £624 million must be raised in loans. That is the lowest proportion of grant to loans that has featured since the system was established.

Indeed, the total settlement represents a significant cut in the context of the £1.54 billion that we announced in 1994-95. That is how we achieved improvements such as the Croydon tramlink and the Manchester metrolink under the last Government, and that is why the right hon. Gentleman has not approved a single light rail scheme since he took office.

The idea that we should depend on the right hon. Gentleman's negotiations with the Treasury for the future of investment in public transport is just more pie in the sky. Is the Strategic Rail Authority an example of the integrated transport policy? All this is based on the premise that privatisation has produced nothing.

Mr. Stevenson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: I am short of time. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not.

What about the £2 billion of additional investment produced by the train operating companies since privatisation, the huge investment announced by Railtrack, the 1,000 new train services, the 25 per cent. increase in passengers, and the fact that more passengers are in trains of their own free will? That is testament to the benefits of privatisation. We do not need a Strategic Rail Authority to build on that; we merely need a Secretary of State who knows his job.

The one benefit conferred by Sir Alastair Morton's taking over of the Secretary of State's responsibility for the railways is that something will be done. That contrasts with the stagnation that we have experienced over the past two and a half years. We do not want re-regulation of the railways, and we do not want the politicisation of the regulator. The Government's policy has led to a share price collapse on Railtrack, and demands for increases in rail fares from the regulator under the stewardship of the Secretary of State.

The 13 December issue of *The Guardian* carries the headline

"Rail fares shock for Prescott",

and a *Financial Times* headline tells us:

"Railtrack seeks huge increase in subsidies".

That is the right hon. Gentleman's policy, and that shows what he has spoilt since he took over as Secretary of State. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) pointed out, the Bill produces no new money for the railway; all that has happened is that confidence has been undermined.

All but three Labour Back Benchers spoke with only one purpose in mind: to criticise the Government's proposals for the sale of NATS. Here we saw the House of Commons coming back to life, and serving the purpose for which it was designed. It is encouraging to note that, when a dispute in the Labour party finally surfaces, it surfaces here. This is where the reputations of Ministers are made and broken.

The Bill completely fails to resolve any of the issues that have been raised by the Minister's right hon. and hon. Friends. The actual shape of the privatisation is not in the Bill. The hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) tried to pretend that that was an advantage, and that there was a deal to be done on the public-private partnership. I rather suspect that, if he believes that, he will be one of the rebels who can be more easily bought off; but I think there are Members of honour on the Labour Benches who will treat the matter with the seriousness that it deserves.

The Minister needs to answer questions about, for example, the nature of the shareholdings. What happens to the management shares after five years, seven years, 10 years? What is the Government's proposal? That is not in the Bill. Who will be the private sector partner in the PPP in this botched privatisation? That is not in the Bill; we are not told even the nature of such a partner. What will be the future of the golden share in clause 49? The Secretary of State clearly did not quite understand the point I was making when he kindly allowed me to intervene. Clause 49(5) says that the Secretary of State can set aside the privileges of the golden share when he is required to do so. More than that, clause 49(7) says:

"The Secretary of State may by order amend or repeal this section."

Therefore, the whole clause on which national security depends and on which the Labour Members are vesting their faith in the Government can be repealed at the stroke of a pen and the vote of a Committee in each of the Houses of Parliament. If the Government are serious about the golden share, there should be no provision for amendment of that clause without primary legislation; otherwise, the golden share is just an empty gesture to buy off dissent among Labour Members.

What about the sale proceeds, which was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood)? What will be the purpose of clause 55

[Mr. Jenkin]

if the debt is not to be written off? If the Secretary of State carries on backtracking, he will just undermine the credibility of his policy. He needs to satisfy his party and to deal with the reasoned amendment, which he has not dealt with at all today, which has been signed by no fewer than 50 of his colleagues and spoken to by others. I take on board the comments by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). She is right: it is not like any other privatisation. There is no unlimited upside. It is more in the nature of a contracting-out than a privatisation. That is why it needs to be done carefully and responsibly.

I agree with many of the concerns that were expressed by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), although I regret that we cannot support his reasoned amendment, but why are the Government not prepared to accept it? Where is the consistency? As the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) said, the Government will allow the Post Office to borrow. Why not NATS? Many other Labour Members raised those concerns.

The Bill is not just the wrong Bill at the wrong time, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea pointed out. It is the epitome of two and a half years of a miserable Government transport policy. To crown it all, the Government have spent the past fortnight trying to pretend that everything in the Government's transport policy is changing. We know why they want people to believe that a U-turn is afoot: their transport policies are unpopular and discredited. They said that things could only get better and they have got worse.

The Secretary of State's reputation is in tatters. He is now just the monkey for the organ grinder in the other place. He spent two and a half years bringing Britain to a standstill and now he finds that he himself is at a standstill. Stripped of his responsibilities, he now has time to wonder when he will be replaced by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), the real Deputy Prime Minister.

The question that the Under-Secretary must answer above all else is: has there been a U-turn? Will the Government revive the Conservatives' plans to give more communities the bypasses that they need? *[Interruption.]* Did I hear a yes? Will they deal with the bottlenecks in road improvements, which have got worse over two and a half years of stagnation? Will they restore the cuts in the trunk road and motorway improvement network? Will they start to reduce fuel duties to make our transport industries competitive again? Will they abandon their vindictive tax campaign against ordinary folk in their cars? Will they stop legislating for restrictions and controls on our railways and buses, so that they are free to invest and to develop their services to passengers?

The Bill is a resounding no to all those questions. Its whole thrust and tone are wrong. It is based on the belief that Whitehall and town hall know best, that ordinary people will respond joyfully and positively to ever higher taxes and incursions on their freedom to travel. It is for the Minister to explain, on behalf of the Minister for Transport in the other place, why the Government's transport policies and their presentation are in such chaos.

9.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): As this is, after all, the season of good will, I should tell the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) that he did his best. Of course, the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) would have done far better, but he is now—I am delighted to say—my hon. Friend. The Government's gain is very definitely the Opposition's loss. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where is he?"] He will be in the Division Lobby, that is for sure.

The Transport Bill deals with four main areas of change: congestion charging, buses and local transport plans, our proposals for a new structure in the railways, and National Air Traffic Services public-private partnership. The Government's proposal to introduce a public-private partnership for NATS has been the subject of serious and important speeches in today's debate. Among those speeches, however, I do not include those by hon. Members from either of the main opposition parties. Let us be entirely clear about it: despite the weasel words of Conservative Front Benchers, their position remains as it always has been—full privatisation of NATS, which is an option entirely rejected by the Government, by every key player in the industry and, not least, by public opinion.

Mr. Salter: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: I shall not give way now. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] My hon. Friend knows that I am tremendously fond of him and that I shall certainly look in his direction eventually. I should point out, however, that 17 Back Benchers spoke about NATS, taking a total of two hours, and that, regrettably, I am alone and have only approximately 10 minutes to deal with the subject. However, I shall return to my hon. Friend in due course.

From Liberal Democrat Members we have had the usual defence of the status quo: it should all be paid for out of the public purse or by public sector borrowing. As usual, the Liberal Democrats are stranded among the flotsam and jetsam, high on the shoreline of history.

Mr. Don Foster: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: No, not yet, but in due course.

I pay tribute to the excellent record of our air traffic controllers and to their outstanding commitment to safety standards in the industry. However, the trade union side in NATS accepts that it is unreasonable to expect the taxpayer to fund the new investment that NATS so urgently requires. I believe that that view is widely shared also by those of my hon. Friends who have expressed reservations about the form of funding proposed by the Government.

Mr. Salter: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend is so persistent that I shall give way at last.

Mr. Salter: Will my hon. Friend expand on the suggestion that we made—that the Transport Research

Laboratory in Wokingham offers a useful and instructive model? The TRL was privatised, but only as a company limited by guarantee and on a not-for-profit basis.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. The TRL privatisation was undertaken by the previous Government, using a competitive tender process. We intend to use a similar process for NATS. There is nothing to stop NATS management or a not-for-profit group submitting a bid, as happened with TRL. The organisation would, of course, have to meet all of our criteria for a strategic partner, and the Government must ensure that the value of our 49 per cent. is retained—it is, after all, a public asset. If a not-for-public organisation is able to do that, there is no reason why it should not be considered on an equal footing with any commercial bid. I hope that that is helpful to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Foster: Is the Minister able to explain by what considerably contorted logic he arrived at the conclusion that a proposition for an independent publicly owned company issuing bonds to raise money is the same as the status quo?

Mr. Hill: The crystal clear logic by which I arrived at that position will unfold in the course of my subsequent remarks.

Enormous, new and exciting opportunities will open up in world aviation in the next few years. By 2010, in United Kingdom airspace alone, there will have been an increase in air traffic movements of 60 per cent. New technology will bring with it the opportunity to export British air traffic expertise on a major scale. In 10 years, it could be possible for air traffic movements into Hong Kong, for example, to be controlled from Swanwick or Prestwick—from the other side of the world.

It is vital that Britain should be at the forefront of the new technology in order to seize these market opportunities, but the competition will be severe. Over the next 10 years both NATS and Eurocontrol expect air traffic control centres in Europe to have consolidated from 30 to six. To meet that challenge, we need state of the art control centres at Swanwick and Prestwick. That is why we need the £1 billion that the strategic partner will generate from the private sector for new investment in NATS over the next 10 years.

Why should the public purse foot that bill or shoulder the financial risk when money is available from the private sector? The lesson of past decades is that public sector borrowing, with its limited horizon of three years at most, simply cannot guarantee the long-term finance necessary to commission the new en route centre at Swanwick, and, I remind my right hon. and hon. Friends from north of the border, the new Scottish centre at Prestwick. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) made a very good speech, and I remind her that, as the Prime Minister said earlier this year, the Government are fully committed to the new Scottish centre and the public-private partnership will be obliged to complete it.

Mr. Redwood: Does the Minister intend to write off NATS debt, or will he promise to strike out in Committee the clause that gives him that power as he has now decided that it is not necessary?

Mr. Hill: Those are matters for negotiation on the development of the PPP. No action is required on the face of the Bill. The disposal of the £300 million debt will be a matter for discussion between the strategic partner and the Government in due course.

The PPP is about more than finance alone. We are all aware of the long and sorry history of inefficiency and delay at Swanwick—five years late in delivery, with a massive cost overrun, and Bechtel brought in, as usual, to project manage the new centre at Prestwick. The truth is that NATS, for all its considerable operational skills, lacks top level skills in key areas such as project management and investment, as well as financial management. That is why, in the Government's view, the independent publicly owned company solution advocated by a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends will not do. It would permit limited borrowing freedom—but under the same management as before.

We do not believe that an IPOC, or a similar solution, would offer the real efficiency driver that would enable NATS to rise to the challenge of new opportunities in the global aviation market. The PPP will enable NATS to sell its operational expertise abroad, to train staff and offer safety management to other air traffic control providers around the world, and, in the longer term, to run those systems for them. These are commercial ventures, the financial risk of which it is proper for the private sector—not the taxpayer—to bear. We need to establish a structure of incentives and disciplines to maximise efficiency. We need to give NATS the commercial freedoms and the management skills to make best use of them. That is why we support the PPP.

In implementing the PPP, it is of course vital that there should be no compromise on national security or safety. I reassure the House that there will be no such compromise. My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) dwelt on national security in his speech. Let me make it clear that the Bill gives the Government the power to direct NATS in the interests of national security. That power will be written into the operating licence. It is exactly the same principle as that which allows the Government to requisition a ship in wartime.

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Mr. Hill: The strategic partner will be selected only after stringent suitability tests, and the Government will have powers to ensure that the PPP—[HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] I will not give way. I must cover the other provisions of the Bill.

The Government will have powers to ensure that the PPP remains in the hands of a fit and proper person whose ownership would not compromise the public interest or national security. The fact is that safety is, and will always be, the Government's overriding priority. Indeed, in establishing the PPP, we shall make a positive contribution to aviation safety by separating safety regulation from service provision. For the first time, we shall create a properly independent safety regulator, to ensure that safety standards are maintained at their existing high levels and improved where necessary—a development long recommended by the airlines, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs and the former Monopolies and Mergers Commission.

There will be no profits before safety under the public-private partnership, any more than there are now at Belfast, Bristol, East Midlands, Leeds Bradford,

[Mr. Hill]

Humberside, London Luton and Newcastle airports, or at any of the 83 airports nationwide that have private sector air traffic control and which are subject to the air safety regulator and safely handle more than 21 million air passengers every year. We want to maintain and build on some of the most stringent air safety standards in the world. There will be no reduction in safety standards or in the safety regulator's powers to enforce them under a public-private partnership. It is for those reasons that I ask the House to oppose the amendment.

I want now to deal with the other provisions that will, in practice, have a more immediate impact on the day-to-day travel experiences of the British public than our proposal for NATS. I thought it proper, however, within the limited time available to me, to respond as fully as possible to the strongly felt and considered views of a number of colleagues whom I deeply respect. "Strongly felt and considered" are not, I am bound to say, the adjectives that I would apply to the claptrap we have heard from Conservative Members on road user charging and workplace parking levies.

Let us leave on one side the sheer irresponsibility and opportunism of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) in breaking a growing cross-party consensus on congestion charging. Well, let us leave it almost on one side. The previous Government, for all their manifold failures in transport policy, were beginning to understand the potential benefits of congestion charging. If not, why did they initiate the London congestion charging research programme, led by MVA Consultancy, in November 1991? If not, why did they support similar research projects in Bristol in 1992, in Edinburgh and Lothian in the same year, in Cambridge in 1993 and in south-east Hampshire in 1994—years during which, incidentally, the right hon. Members for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and for North–West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) were Secretaries of State?

Mr. MacGregor: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is perfectly reasonable to undertake research inquiries into various options? However, the lessons of those were that we should not pursue congestion charging for all the reasons that I set out in my speech.

Mr. Prescott: What about the Green Paper?

Mr. Hill: I was coming on to that. The Conservative Government also commissioned a study by the university of Westminster on transport and the environment, which it published in April 1996 to coincide with their Green Paper on transport. The then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), said in a press release:

"The study shows that people are increasingly concerned about the impact of traffic growth on their daily lives, but accept the need for measures to restrain their own car use if they are provided with reasonable alternatives. These views along with the strong opinions expressed that the expenditure should be switched from roads to public transport coincide with some of the main messages in the Transport Green Paper."

There was a growing political consensus. As I have said before, in seeking to politicise the issue of congestion charging—

Sir Brian Mawhinney: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hill: No, I have passed on; history has passed the right hon. Gentleman by. *[Interruption.]* Okay, I will make an exception—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I call Dr. Strang.

Dr. Strang: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Madam Speaker: Is it your pleasure that the amendment be withdrawn?

Hon. Members: No.

Madam Speaker: I must put the Question at the appropriate time. I believe that the Minister was about to give way to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney).

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I am grateful to the Minister for his courtesy in giving way. If he had read my evidence to the Select Committee about charging in inner-city areas—evidence which included the questions that I put today—he would be able to tell us why this legislation was introduced without answering any of the fundamental questions that must be dealt with before congestion becomes nothing but another Labour stealth tax.

Mr. Hill: Not only did I read the observations that the right hon. Gentleman made before the Select Committee, I was on the Committee when he made them. Notwithstanding the mounting evidence and the research undertaken by his Department, he did not have the courage to introduce congestion charging. The Labour Government have that courage.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham claims that the Government's proposals for congestion charging are anti-car. Anti-car? Do we hear that from the party that brought in the automatic fuel duty escalator and increased fuel tax from 7 to 42p a litre? What could be more anti-car than that? Anti-car—from the party that invented road congestion at 70 cars per mile. The Conservatives spent £70 billion on new roads and ended up with 100 cars per mile. What could be more anti-car than that? Anti-car—from the party that cut road maintenance by 9 per cent. over four years and left Britain's motorway and trunk road network in its worst state of maintenance since records began. What could be more anti-car than that?

The Labour Government are the pro-car Government. This year, we are spending £765 million on road maintenance—40 per cent. more than in the last year of Tory rule. This Government have ended the automatic fuel duty escalator and ring-fenced any further real increase for improving roads and modernising public transport. This Government are tackling the biggest

problem facing drivers in urban areas—congested roads—because we realise that the most pro-car action a Government can take is to reduce congestion on our roads. The Government are pro-car in tackling congestion. We are pro-choice in transport, because we have guaranteed that the net revenues of congestion charging will be put into local transport improvements—both public transport and roads.

The Government believe that local people are best placed to find local solutions to local transport problems. In general, we received an excellent response to the first and provisional round of local capital transport plans. Last week, we were able to give tangible expression to our commitment to local decision making in transport in a settlement which, at £755 million, represented a 20 per cent. increase over last year. Over the next three years we shall be allocating a massive extra £700 million to local transport plans. Because of that success, the Bill will place those plans on a statutory footing.

However, if local solutions are right for local transport problems, we need a strategic and national vision for our railway network. From the confusion and fragmentation of rail privatisation, we need to bring order, co-ordination and accountability. The Bill provides for that. We shall establish a new Strategic Rail Authority and we shall strengthen the powers of the rail regulator. Furthermore, we shall strengthen the consumer's voice by giving a new structure and new powers to the rail passengers committees.

In 1997, we inherited a crumbling transport system that failed to provide real choice. We inherited underinvestment in road maintenance and a long list of frozen road building schemes. We inherited a rail system that had been broken up into a hundred pieces and flogged off at a massive loss to the taxpayer. Under the plans of the previous Administration, we would now be spending nearly £1 billion less on transport each year. We are investing in London's underground, in local authorities' transport plans and in national roads. We need no lessons on transport policy from the party that gave us road congestion, the party of rail privatisation, the party that would privatise the—

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 33, Noes 321.

Division No. 21] **[10 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cotter, Brian
Dafis, Cynog
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian

Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading):—

The House divided: Ayes 358, Noes 163.

Division No. 22] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*

Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham

Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dafis, Cynog
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

TRANSPORT BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Transport Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by any Minister of the Crown or government department under or by virtue of the Act, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment;

(2) the payment out of the National Loans Fund of sums required by the Secretary of State for making loans to—

(a) a transferee under a transfer scheme made under the Act, or

(b) the Strategic Rail Authority;

(3) the reduction of the assets of the National Loans Fund by an amount corresponding to such liability of the Civil Aviation Authority as the Secretary of State extinguishes by order.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Question agreed to.

TRANSPORT BILL [*WAYS AND MEANS*]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Transport Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the inclusion in licences granted under the Act of provisions requiring payments to be made;

(2) the imposition of charges to corporation tax by provisions relating to transfer schemes;

(3) the making of road user charging schemes and workplace parking levy licensing schemes;

(4) payments into the Consolidated Fund and the National Loans Fund.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Question agreed to.

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Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Further to your ruling earlier today on the matter of the Solicitor-General and the announcement about prosecutions against spies, it has been confirmed that the answer was placed in the Library considerably after 3.30 pm and considerably after the information was given to the press. Given that there was no statement today, can I seek your advice about what remains to Members to get Ministers to observe the rule that you laid down and, if possible, to get the Solicitor-General to the House before we rise for Christmas to make a statement tomorrow?

Madam Speaker: As I told the House, the rule is that such questions must be answered no earlier than 3.30 pm. Perhaps I can look into the matter. I cannot command a Minister to come to the House to make a statement, but no doubt Ministers on the Treasury Bench heard what the hon. Gentleman had to say.

Cane Hill, Coulsdon

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

10.29 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Before the House adjourns, I should like to raise the issue of the future development of the Cane Hill site in Coulsdon. Cane Hill represents more than 200 acres of green belt. It is a prime site of outstanding beauty and location. It sits on a hill top in the metropolitan greenbelt area to the south of London, adjacent to the A23 Brighton road. It is in the southern part of my constituency, in the southern part of the borough of Croydon, and it abuts the London-Surrey boundary and the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), whom I am pleased to see in his place.

As a site, Cane Hill is attractive to any developer under any circumstances, and it offers first-class links to the motorway network and to Gatwick, Heathrow and Biggin Hill. It has a mainline rail station by its front entrance. It is, in short, a world-class site. Most of the site is agricultural, farmed by a local farmer. On about 20 per cent. of the site there is a small 23-bed medium secure unit for those with severe mental health problems, and there used to be a hospital, formerly for those with mental health needs, which closed in 1988.

Now, to the concern of my constituents, the NHS wishes to build a 120-bed medium secure unit. The matter is being considered by the planning committee of Croydon council at an open meeting early next year. The object of tonight's debate is to highlight to the Secretary of State, through his Minister, why I believe it should be the subject of a public inquiry.

The debate is not about the treatment of the mentally ill. It is about the determination of Labour-controlled Croydon borough council to push the project through, regardless of greenbelt regulations. There is a small group opposed to any mental health facilities on the site, but in my judgment, considering the presence of a small unit there already, that is unrealistic. I congratulate the *Croydon Advertiser* on its balanced articles on the work of the medium secure unit and on promoting awareness of its work.

The overwhelming majority of the people of Coulsdon and the surrounding area object to the dramatic expansion of the facility, the abuse of greenbelt procedures, and above all the elimination of any hope of worthwhile economic development on the site.

When the present administration on Croydon council—the Labour party—took control in 1994, it did so with a pledge to build a science and technology park on the site. Although that was not everyone's first preference, it was an acceptable proposal. Sadly, the council dithered, and in 1997 the Lambeth health authority stepped into the vacuum and proposed the construction of a 120-bed medium secure unit.

The recent history of the Cane Hill site is highly pertinent. In January 1996 a draft development brief for Cane Hill hospital was produced. In it, there was an indication from the South Thames regional health authority that the unit would need to be expanded to accommodate future health care needs. Relocation was a

[Mr. Richard Ottaway]

clear option, and a number of possible alternative sites were mooted. The health authority was asked to investigate further.

Against that background, on 30 January 1997 the borough of Croydon adopted its unitary development plan. It recognised in paragraph RO 10 that Cane Hill could be redeveloped, and set out clear factors to be taken into account, as well the need to comply with planning policy guidance note 2, more commonly known as PPG2.

The plan recognised that there was a development brief for a science and technology park, but set out other uses consistent with policy RO 10 and listed them in descending order of preference as

"a science park, business innovation centre, a technology centre, environmental research centre, university, business park or regional conference centre."

As a throwaway at the end, the plan stated:

"The Development brief may allow for other uses or a combination of uses."

There was no reference to a new medium secure unit, let alone one on the scale that is currently being considered.

On the map in the UDP, the area is marked as a metropolitan greenbelt site of borough-wide importance for nature conservation.

If further evidence were needed of the council's position when the unitary development plan was adopted, it is available in a letter dated 8 January 1997 from the leader of the council, who is now the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies). He wrote to the Government on behalf of the council about the medium secure unit. The letter stated:

"This would be a new development that would go well beyond an extension of the existing SASS unit and would, in all probability, put an end to the Science and Technology Park proposal that the Council, SOLOTEC and NHS ESTs advisers had been working towards over the last two to three years."

The letter tellingly continued:

"I would suggest, therefore, that Cane Hill should be excluded from any search for a site for a new MSU."

It is ironic that, having lumbered us with a science park, the hon. Gentleman has abandoned that view and now supports a park and ride scheme. However, that is another story.

Further evidence of the council's opposition to a medium secure unit and the lack of any intention to include it in the science park is found in a briefing to Members of Parliament and councillors, dated 24 January 1997. It emphasised that the aim was to establish a successful science park at Cane Hill, and stated that, in the council's judgment, a medium secure unit would be detrimental to a successful park development. The briefing stated:

"There would also be a marketing issue . . . of the perception of an MSU, by investors, developers and potential tenants. Urgent political lobbying is required to ensure that the acknowledged benefits to the London economy of a science park are not compromised or possibly sacrificed to . . . the NHS service requirements".

That view, which the council expressed, highlights the impact of a medium secure unit on a science park. It is somewhat surprising to find that the council has now changed its mind.

After the general election in May 1997 and the change of Government, the council and I jointly sought a meeting with the Secretary of State for Health to discuss the site. Before the meeting, the new council leader, Councillor Shawcross, issued a press release in July. It stated that she hoped that the meeting with the Department would result in the

"NHS looking to meet their own service requirements from elsewhere in their land-holdings."

That is, not on Cane Hill. That was the position before the meeting with the Department.

The meeting took place with a junior Health Minister, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), who is now a Minister of State in the Home Office. At the meeting, he confirmed that he intended a medium secure unit for approximately 50 beds to be built on the site. The application for a 120-bed medium secure unit was therefore a surprise. That happened despite the representations that had been made to me at the meeting. It is disappointing to find that a Minister misled a constituency Member of Parliament in that way.

The most devastating blow to the plan was the subsequent U-turn by the leader of the council. After the meeting, she wrote to the Minister to thank him for his positive attitude. She said that she left the meeting feeling

"real pride that our Labour Government has Ministers of such outstanding ability and commitment".

That was written by someone who had been told that she would get the opposite of what she had requested. The letter continued:

"the proposed MSU on the old Portnalls House part of the site is certain to be controversial with local residents. But I personally accept these are necessary facilities to fulfil the healthcare needs of the community. Although naturally disappointed that the scope for economic development has been substantially reduced, the Council will be as supportive as possible."

The council changed its position at that point—quite a U-turn in only a few weeks. From that moment, the die was cast.

Croydon council planning committee is due to consider the application to build a medium secure unit early next year. The Minister will probably be as surprised as me to hear that the number of protesters against the application is believed to be more than 4,000. That shows the importance and relevance of the matter to the local community.

The Minister may not fully appreciate that the medium secure unit will not be built on the footprint of the old Cane Hill hospital. The council is taking the square footage of the old hospital, adding to it, splitting it in two, moving one bit to the other side of the site and putting bits of green belt in its place. The plan is to build the MSU on one bit and the science park on the other. I have to tell the Minister, and I hope that she agrees, that such messing around with the green belt will be detrimental to its quality. In my judgment, the openness of the green belt in the Coulsdon area will be diminished and a contribution will be made to urban sprawl, because the site is immediately adjacent to the built-up area of London.

The Minister will be well aware that the key to all that is in the rules to PPG2 and paragraph C4 of annexe E, which deals with redevelopment in the green belt, and it is the view of many that they are being ignored by the council. Extensive correspondence with the council reflects its determination to have its way, and although it

argues that it is complying with paragraph C4, I and several thousand others suggest that it is not. It is difficult to see how the criteria in paragraph C4 can be met, as the proposal will clearly have a greater impact on the openness of the green belt: first, there will be new building in an open area—further from the urban area—and secondly, it offends the greenbelt purposes of checking the unrestricted sprawl of large urban areas, safeguarding the country from encroachment and encouraging the recycling of derelict land.

I quote the submission by the Croydon Society, which said:

"The prevention of urban sprawl would be negated and openness would be reduced by the development of the Portnalls site. Yet these qualities are cited in PPG 2 para 1.4 as the most important attributes of green belts."

As the Coulsdon Green Belt Association says, some kind of development must eventually take place within the existing footprint at Cane Hill,

"but the application violates six acres of green belt without establishing the 'very special circumstances' which ministerial guidelines require before waiving the normal presumption against development in the green belt area may be considered."

The much respected Mr. Charles Hancock of the Coulsdon Forum says that PPG2

"sets out Green Belt safeguards which this planning application seriously ignores".

I hope that the Minister has been given a flavour of what is being said locally. This is a major site and clearly she must consider matters that have more than local importance—I choose my words carefully.

My second submission to the Minister is that an MSU of the nature of that being considered represents a departure from the unitary development plan. That in turn imposes on the Secretary of State an obligation to call in the application and hold a public inquiry. The council has fiercely resisted that suggestion: it wants to push the plan through without a public inquiry, but its impartiality cannot be guaranteed. It must be remembered that the entire site belongs to the national health service, and to develop the science and technology park the council needs NHS approval to sell it for that purpose.

It is becoming clear that the council is prepared to give permission to build the MSU regardless of the environmental and social consequences, to get its way with the park. That was confirmed in a letter to me dated 28 October in which the leader of the council said that

"the NHS has always indicated that the principle of relocation and expansion of the MSU needs to be resolved before disposal of the remainder of the site . . . I can assure you that a considerable amount of time has been spent with the NHS to pave the way for a mutually agreeable outcome."

In other words, a deal has been struck: "We'll let you build an MSU and then you'll let us have our science park." To that extent, the council's eyes are blinkered and its judgment is suspect. After seven years of dither over the science park, it has done a deal with Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham health authority, but in my judgment the council ought not to be entrusted with the decision on the future of one of the nation's prime development sites.

As the Minister might imagine, there is widespread local concern. The proposed development is bang next door to two primary schools, and stories of the conduct of patients out on day release are legion and at odds with official statistics. As Councillor David Osland said in a letter to the *Croydon Advertiser*:

"Coulsdon for many years enjoyed a satisfactory relationship with Cane Hill Hospital and its thousands of patients and staff. But the nature of the proposed MSU was such that it ought to be built on a brown-field site attached to a hospital with a proper level of Psychiatric services, not built on green belt as a sop to developers who may be put off by the close proximity of the existing MSU."

That fairly reflects local opinion.

If this application goes through, the science park will not get off the ground. The application is not included in the unitary development plan and is a departure. There is a clear breach of the policy guidelines relating to the green belt, and the council is clearly not impartial. Under the circumstances, I urge the Secretary of State, through the Minister, whom I welcome, to exercise his powers and call it in.

10.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) on securing a debate on issues that are currently of considerable concern in his constituency. I listened with interest to the points that he made. From the letters received by my Department, I am aware of the strength of local feeling about the proposals for the site. The hon. Gentleman's contribution gave further flavour to the issue, as he hoped.

Two planning applications have been made in respect of this site: one is for a larger secure unit than the one already on the site, and the other is the proposed science and business park. As a member of the Opposition Front Bench, the hon. Gentleman should know the planning system well enough to be aware that neither I nor any of my ministerial colleagues can comment on planning applications, because to do so may compromise the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial role in considering the case for call-in or in taking a decision in the event that Croydon council resolve to refuse planning permission and the applicant submits an appeal.

As I have already said in correspondence with the hon. Gentleman, we are keeping these applications under review, but we will allow the council time to reach a view on the proposals before deciding whether call-in is justified. For reasons that I shall touch on and of which the hon. Gentleman is aware, Croydon has postponed its formal consideration of the matter in committee until February or March next year.

Croydon received the application for the medium secure unit in March 1999. The process of conducting public consultation has raised issues on the safety of local residents on which the council has sought advice. The time scale involved is completely justified by the nature of the application, by local opinion and by the complexity of the issues involved in making the decision. Having taken account of the time scale, I find it hard to accept the hon. Gentleman's assertion that Croydon is trying to push through the application for a medium secure unit. By the time the council considers the application, it will have taken a year for it to come to a decision. It is taking that time because of the need for expert advice and the issues raised by the case.

The business park application was also made in March this year. I understand that the council has now asked for an environmental assessment from the applicant, and that

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

is being prepared. The application involves other complex issues in addition to those raised by the hon. Gentleman, including the imminent construction of the Coulsdon inner relief road, which may give rise to design changes to the proposals.

The Secretary of State's role in the planning process means that he has at his disposal the power to call in an application. I understand from what the hon. Gentleman said and from correspondence that we have received that he does not agree with Croydon's preliminary view that the application for a medium secure unit is not a departure from the unitary development plan. I have seen the correspondence that he has received from the director of planning and development, which sets out in some detail why Croydon has come to the decision on paragraph C4 and the other requirements of the regulations, and why it argues that the application is not a departure from the UDP. If it were a departure, it would have to be referred to the Secretary of State now as a call-in.

At present, this is a matter for the council to decide. In the light of the hon. Gentleman's comments, we shall consider carefully whether that power should be exercised, and, if so, when; but, for the moment, the Secretary of State is exercising his power of call-in in the normal way. As under the last Administration, it is normal practice to use the power of call-in sparingly. It is important that applications are generally left in the first instance to the locally elected body to determine, and are called in only if, among other things, matters of more than local importance are involved.

Although the Secretary of State has power to call in at any time, it is our practice, for good reasons, to let the authority consider an application and reach a view before the Department decides whether to call in. That enables all local and statutory consultees' views to be taken into account and aired publicly; and an application refused by the authority would come before the Secretary of State as an appeal anyway.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The institution that we are discussing is on the boundary between Croydon and the borough of Reigate and Banstead. My borough has asked for a call-in. I hope that the fact that the institution is on the boundary will carry some weight with the Secretary of State in due course.

Ms Hughes: As I have said, we are cognisant of the contentious and complex nature of the application. I am trying to explain why it is important for the local authority to be allowed to make a decision in the first instance. It brings into the open all the various local views pertaining to the application. That means that, should the Secretary of State decide to call in the application subsequently—which he is perfectly entitled to do—those local views will be in the public domain, and will be available for him to consider if, in the event, he calls the application in.

We are executing normal procedure by allowing Croydon to reach an initial view on the applications. When it has done so, if necessary, we may well issue a holding direction to allow ourselves time to examine Croydon's decision, the reasons for its decision and its report to its planning committee, and to decide whether to intervene and call in either or both the applications. The views of both the hon. Member for Croydon, South and the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) will be taken into account.

I stress that our feeling that it is important to let Croydon make the initial decision does not mean that the Secretary of State will not exercise his power of call-in later. There are, however, distinct advantages in allowing the local planning authority to make an initial decision, because that puts all local views into the public domain.

I cannot comment on the specific applications, but I will make some general and relevant comments about the planning system and about the green belt. The planning system regulates the development and use of land in the public interest. We believe that the system as a whole—which includes the preparation of development plans by local authorities such as Croydon—is the most effective way of reconciling what are often competing demands for development and for the protection of the environment. The planning system has a key role in contributing to the Government's strategy for sustainable development.

The Government are committed to a plan-led system of development control. That means that any application for planning permission, or any appeal, should be determined in line with the approved development plan—as the hon. Member for Croydon, South said—unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Whoever decides such planning applications and appeals—whether it be a local planning authority such as Croydon, a planning inspector deciding an appeal or, indeed, the Secretary of State—should always take into account whether the proposed development would cause demonstrable harm to openly important interests. Our aim in the plan-led system is to secure rational and consistent decisions, greater clarity, secure public involvement, quicker decisions and so on. Material considerations must be genuine planning considerations. They must relate to the purpose of planning law, which is to regulate the development and use of land in the public interest.

Where it is not already incorporated into their development plans, local planning authorities also need to take into account national and regional planning guidance. The national guidance is set out in various planning policy guidance notes. In London, the regional guidance is in the strategic guidance for London planning authorities—RPG3, as it is known.

Croydon council has to take its adopted UDP policies as a starting point and weigh up other material considerations in reaching its decision on any planning application that is before it. In particular, it has to have regard to PPG notes, especially if they are more recent than the policies that are outlined in its own UDP.

On another general point, the Government recognise and uphold the rights of property and privileges of ownership, so owners of land and property rightly expect to be able to use, or to develop their land as they judge best, unless consequences for the environment, or the community would be unacceptable. Therefore, individual property owners are allowed to enhance, or to improve their use of land and buildings.

I turn to a key issue for any application at Cane Hill: the green belt. I hope that I do not have to restate the Government's support and, indeed, record in protecting and increasing the green belt. We remain firm in those commitments, which I have stated personally recently. Some hon. Members have raised concerns, prompted by

headlines in a recent edition of the London *Evening Standard*. The claims that we are not supporting the green belt are not true.

In relation to Croydon, annexe C of PPG2 says that redevelopment, or infilling of major developed sites—a particular defined category in the regulations—in the green belt may offer the opportunity for environmental improvement, without adding to the impact on the openness of greenbelt land. Such redevelopment, or infilling will not be inappropriate development in law if sites are identified in adopted development plans. Examples of major developed sites will include hospitals. Such sites must be substantial in size. In that context, I understand that Cane Hill is identified as a major developed site—a specific category—in Croydon's current adopted UDP.

As well as identifying a site for the purposes of annexe C, local planning authorities may set out in their plan a policy for future development. Even once a site is so identified, PPG2 contains criteria that constrain redevelopment. Those say that it should have no greater impact than the existing development on the openness of the green belt and should contribute to the achievement of objectives. There are others limiting height and footprint, but there is no requirement that the existing footprint of buildings should be maintained to satisfy those criteria.

Therefore, we will monitor carefully the proposals at Cane Hill. I have heard the points made by the hon. Member for Croydon, South. Those are not agreed at this stage by Croydon.

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at one minute to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 21 December 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*By Order*)

Order for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Tuesday 11 January.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Coronary Heart Disease

1. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): If he will make a statement on the development of coronary heart disease services. [102260]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The White Paper "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation" set a target to reduce the death rate from heart disease, stroke and related illnesses by at least 40 per cent. by 2010. Modernising cardiac services is one of the Government's top health priorities.

Mr. Hoyle: Does my right hon. Friend accept that more investment is needed for coronary heart disease services, both locally and nationally and especially in the north-west, as there is a dire need to ensure that lives are not lost at the rate that they were in the previous 18 years? When will he provide details of authorities' allocations for 2000-01?

Mr. Milburn: I agree with my hon. Friend that there is a need to modernise our cardiac services, in his part of the country and elsewhere, because they suffered years of neglect under the previous Government. That is precisely why we have made the modernisation of cardiac services one of our top priorities. Today, I have placed in the Vote Office details of health authority allocations for the year beginning April 2000, and the average cash increase is 6.8 per cent. compared with 6.6 per cent. for this year. That is sensible sustained investment, which will continue the Government's 10-year programme of modernisation, and it includes extra money for cardiac services so that thousands more heart patients can get the early access to heart surgery that they need.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Does the Secretary of State recall promising the House that hospital consultants would

"help shape the local health service as they have been unable to do under the internal market"—[*Official Report*, 24 February 1998; Vol. 307, c. 165.]?

How does he reconcile that promise with a letter from the senior cardiologist at the Royal Surrey hospital—a copy of which I sent him two weeks ago—saying that there has been a 20 per cent. cut in the budget for heart tests at the Royal Surrey and in the region since the Government came to power as a direct result of his reforms and the transfer of responsibility for that budget from local doctors to the local health authority?

Mr. Milburn: On the specific issue, I am aware of the correspondence and some of the cases that the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) have raised, but I understand that those allegations are not wholly substantiated. I shall be meeting the right hon. Lady this afternoon to talk about some of the issues, but the hon. Gentleman has to be very careful: it is not true that, somehow or other, the problems with cardiac surgery began on 1 May 1997. We acknowledge that there are problems, but the truth is that cardiac services in our country suffered years if not decades of neglect when his party was in office. We have the appalling coincidence of Britain having some of the highest rates of cardiac heart disease and some of the lowest rates of cardiac intervention in the developed world. We are putting that right by investing more money, which his party opposes.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Although there is a crying need for resources for coronary heart disease services throughout the country, may I, on behalf of my constituents, congratulate the Government on allowing a rate of increase to health authorities that is triple the rate of inflation? That is almost unprecedented in British history.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—we are putting more money into the national health service and today we are paying the second instalment of the record cash injection that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a year ago. That is money for modernisation and it is opposed by the Conservative party, which described it as reckless, mad and irresponsible. Conservative Members cannot have their cake and eat it—even their Christmas cake, at this time of year—and, even though my remarks are not seasonal, they cannot get away with complaining about the state of cardiac services and opposing extra investment in our public services at the same time. They have to come off the fence. It is about time that we had honesty in the debate from the Conservative party: does it support or oppose extra investment in our key public services?

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the promised extra money for cardiology is new money or part of the extra £21 billion

that has already been allocated over the next three years? If it is part of that £21 billion, which other services will be cut to fund it?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Lady needs to understand that that is extra money on top of the extra money that is already going in this year. There is extra new money this year, extra new money on top of that next year and extra new money on top of that the year after. She should also understand that all that extra investment is opposed by the Conservative party under its tax and spending plans because its priority is tax cuts for the privileged few, which would be achieved at the expense of public services for the many.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): In this "year of delivery", how does the Secretary of State square his announcement of an increase in the number of heart specialists by more than 400 with the fact that, according to the chairman of the British Medical Association, those specialists are already on the NHS training ladder? In the new Labour lexicon, does the word "extra" mean the same in relation to the number of doctors as it means in relation to the number of police on the beat?

Mr. Milburn: That was a tricky one! As the hon. Lady knows fine well, there is a difference between doctors in training and doctors in post. I decided that there would be extra consultant posts.

There is a difference between being in training and being in post. The Opposition are in training; we are in post.

Cancer Treatment

2. **Mr. James Clappison** (Hertsmere): What recent representations he has received about the availability of cancer treatment. [102261]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The Government receive many representations about the availability of cancer treatment from the public, and from professional organisations.

The Government have made cancer one of their top priorities, and have appointed Professor Mike Richards national cancer director. Professor Richards has already started to meet professional groups to discuss future developments in the improvement of cancer care.

Mr. Clappison: As prostate cancer is set to become the commonest male cancer in the next millennium, is there not a strong case for a prostate screening programme for men of the appropriate age? When can we expect such a programme?

Yvette Cooper: Prostate cancer kills about 10,000 men each year, and we take it extremely seriously. Population screening is not currently recommended, on the advice of the national screening committee, but, as I have said, we take the issue seriously, and have asked the committee to re-examine it in the new year. It will be doing so.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): We have the Calman-Hine guidelines relating to cancer services, but we know that they have not been followed in all parts of the NHS. Will my hon. Friend take it on herself to ensure that best practice is observed throughout the health service, so that all cancer sufferers are given the best possible treatment regardless of where they live?

Yvette Cooper: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and we are committed to ending the unacceptable lottery of care—the postcode lottery—throughout the country. Even more unacceptable is the fact that those who are least likely to survive cancer live in low-income areas. We have appointed Professor Mike Richards as national cancer director so that he can examine exactly those issues, and improve cancer care across the board.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): The Government's new priority on cancer is welcome, but are they not putting the cart before the horse in establishing the policy of a two-week wait between referral and consultation? How many trusts are meeting that target? Is the World Health Organisation not correct in saying that the policy is flawed unless the necessary resources are provided to ensure that it can be delivered?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell the hon. Gentleman for a start that, according to the most recent figures, 95 per cent. of women who are referred urgently in connection with breast cancer are seen within two weeks. That has been the first roll-out of the two-week wait; we will extend it in regard to other cancers over the next two years.

I am surprised by Opposition Members' objection to the two-week wait. Patients with suspected cancer are extremely anxious. Will Opposition Members go into the next election promising to end the two-week wait?

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I congratulate the ministerial team on the launch of the cancer services collaborative. It includes nine national networks, one of which is in Leicestershire and involves the north-west Lancashire primary care group and Glenfield hospital. Is my hon. Friend aware of the cloud of uncertainty that hangs over that hospital, and especially over the breast care unit, which was opened by the last Secretary of State for Health? Will she give careful consideration to any proposals from the area health authority that would downgrade the hospital and jeopardise the excellent work done by the breast care unit and by the hospital in general?

Yvette Cooper: I shall certainly look into those points. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the introduction of cancer collaboratives is an example of superb and best practice in introducing and improving cancer care across the country. The collaboratives will smooth patients' experience, so that they no longer have to wait and are able to book admissions and receive care when they want it.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): The director of the Cancer Research Campaign's education group says that the Government's cancer initiative has led to a waste of resources and a waste of specialist time. The professor of cancer medicine at Imperial college says that the whole approach is flawed. He also said that we have a shortage

of more than 500 cancer specialists, a £1.2 billion backlog in radiotherapy equipment, and need £170 million a year more for chemotherapy. Which of those figures does the Minister think is wrong?

Yvette Cooper: As the hon. Gentleman raises those points, I assume that he will welcome the 6.8 per cent. cash increase to health authorities across the country, which allows them not only to improve treatment for cancer care and treatment, but to address all health issues. Whereas the Government are committed to ending the unacceptable lottery of care, Conservative Members want to replace it with a new lottery which is based on patients' ability to pay.

Dr. Fox: That was an appalling evasion even for a Minister in this Government. Although the Minister has decided to give the soundbite of the day rather than answer any questions in the House, will she say why—when we are supposed to have a national health service, and the cancer initiative is under way—the proportion of patients seen within two weeks varies so hugely across the country? The fact is that 98 per cent. of patients in the south-west have been seen within two weeks, whereas the percentage is only 61 per cent. in the north-west. Why?

Yvette Cooper: As I said, we are determined to end the unacceptable lottery of care. Who does the hon. Gentleman think introduced the lottery of care in the United Kingdom? It was introduced by the previous Government. They introduced the internal market, which has created unacceptable variations in care right across the country. This Government are determined to do something about the situation, and we are implementing policies to do exactly that.

Dr. Fox: We have a Health Minister who cannot answer the basic questions asked by the professor at Imperial College and who does not know why cancer outcomes in the north-west are so bad. We also have huge regional variations in access to care; poorer outcomes than comparable countries in cancer treatment; staff shortages; and, now, rationing of medicines and half a million people simply waiting to get on the waiting list. In other words, we have a national health service that is not national, and in which health targets are not being met and services are well below par. Is it not true that, in Labour's so-called year of delivery, the Government's health policies are a complete and unmitigated disaster?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman refers to international comparisons, but the most extensive international comparisons date from the mid-1990s. I am therefore still wondering who he thinks is responsible for the condition of cancer care in the United Kingdom. The Government have made delivering on cancer our top priority, and that is exactly what we shall do. That is why we have spent an extra £70 million on improving cancer care since the general election, and why we shall spend an additional £80 million on it in the next two years. How would Conservative Members afford any of those improvements, given that they believe that our increased health spending is reckless and irresponsible?

Barnsley District General Hospital

3. **Mr. Eric Illsley** (Barnsley, Central): What representations he has received regarding the possible loss of accreditation by the royal colleges of Barnsley district general hospital. [102263]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): None; any such representations are made to the Specialist Training Authority, which is responsible for the supervision of specialist training in hospital practice in the United Kingdom. No such representations have been received by the Specialist Training Authority on Barnsley district general hospital.

Mr. Illsley: Is my hon. Friend aware that the health problems that we already have in Barnsley are likely to be exacerbated if the royal colleges withdraw accreditation for consultant posts at hospitals serving fewer than 500,000 people? Does he agree that the people of Barnsley should not be required to travel long distances, to other towns and cities, simply to see a consultant? Is there any action that he could take to intervene in the matter, to ensure that a full national health service is still available to the people of Barnsley?

Mr. Hutton: I can reassure my hon. Friend on all of those points. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), has just made it clear that we are committed to a comprehensive national health service that is available to all constituents in all parts of the country and provides a first-class service. That is unlike the Conservative party, which sees the future of the NHS as a second-line service for those who cannot afford to take out private health insurance.

In relation to my hon. Friend's specific point about the report from the royal colleges, that was just one contribution to an important continuing debate. He will be aware that any proposal to change or reconfigure national heath services in any part of the country is subject to a full and proper system of public consultation. If local community health councils seek to object to any of the proposals, the decisions will be made by Ministers.

I am sure that my hon. Friend, on behalf of his constituents, will welcome the nearly £12 million of additional funding for Barnsley health authority which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced today—an increase of nearly 8 per cent.

Hospitals (Gosport)

4. **Mr. Peter Viggers** (Gosport): If he will make a statement on future hospital provision on the Gosport peninsula. [102264]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): The Portsmouth and South East Hampshire health authority is currently preparing detailed proposals on future hospital provision in the area and these proposals will be subject to full statutory public consultation in the new year.

In the meantime, Portsmouth and South East Hampshire health authority is working with the Defence Secondary Care Agency and other key players to ensure that effective patient care is maintained for both NHS and service patients.

Mr. Viggers: Is the Minister aware that my constituents will not regard that answer as satisfactory, any more than they will regard as satisfactory the fact that she could write to me last week almost in the role of a casually interested observer of the problems of hospital care in the Gosport peninsula? Ministers are responsible. The Government have created the problem with the closure of the Royal Hospital Haslar. It is for the Government, through the NHS, to resolve the problem. Will the Minister give active support to the NHS taking over Haslar facilities?

Ms Stuart: I take great issue with the assumption that I am just a casual observer of events in the Gosport peninsula. It is important that efficient services are delivered to the local population. There has already been a £72 million private finance initiative investment in the Queen Alexandra hospital to improve facilities. Similarly, the hon. Gentleman is more than aware that extensive discussions are going on at the moment. I have written to my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces to facilitate negotiations about the continued use of the Haslar site. Negotiations are going on with the ambulance service to ensure that patients who need urgent care are stabilised during transport. We have made a firm commitment, and an extensive consultation process will go on over the next three months to ensure that the people of the Gosport peninsula receive appropriate services.

Aricept

5. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): Which health authorities authorise the prescribing of Aricept on the NHS. [102265]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I understand that there is some prescribing of Aricept in all health authority areas.

Mr. Chope: May I take this opportunity to tell the Secretary of State how disgusted people in Dorset are at the fact that, for the second year running, they will have the lowest per capita increase in health funding? Is that not discrimination by the Government against a county with a lot of Conservative Members of Parliament?

Does the Secretary of State accept that there is postcode rationing of Aricept at the moment? If one lives in the Southampton constituency of the Minister of State or over the border in New Milton, one can receive Aricept when it is recommended by a clinician. If one lives in Highcliffe, one cannot receive Aricept on the NHS, even when it is recommended by a clinician. Is not that wholly outrageous and unfair? What are the Government going to do about it?

Mr. Milburn: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to stand up to thank the Government for the extra £28 million that we are investing in his health authority area from April next year. That is on top of the extra millions that we are already investing. If the hon. Gentleman has a complaint about a lack of investment in his area, he ought to take it up with his Front-Bench colleagues. They oppose our spending plans. The Conservative party cannot get away with saying simultaneously that the Government are spending too much money on our public services, that our spending plans are reckless, madness and irresponsible, and that we are spending too little.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Answer the question.

Mr. Milburn: It is time for Opposition Members—including the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who is chuntering from the Front Bench—to come clean on this matter. Which is it? Do they want more spending, or less?

On Aricept and the lottery of care, it is worth reminding Conservative Members that it was their Government who created the lottery of care in the national health service and that the present Government not only acknowledge that it exists but are taking action to tackle it.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I thank my right hon. Friend for the extra 7.46 per cent. that Nottingham health authority will have next year.

Dementia is a cruel condition from which an increasing number of people suffer. It is difficult to know what effect Aricept has on dementia, but will my right hon. Friend please ensure that research on dementia, which does not have the same buzz as cancer and heart disease, gets its fair share of NHS resources?

Mr. Milburn: I agree with what my hon. Friend says. Aricept and other potential anti-Alzheimer's drugs are precisely the sort of drugs that we have referred to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence for its first work programme, which includes an assessment of drugs and treatments not only for dementia but for other serious and chronic conditions such as cancer, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, hepatitis C and motor neurone disease.

That is important because, for the first time, the national health service, in all parts of the country, whether in the form of health authorities or of individual clinicians, will have clear, authoritative guidance about the treatments that work best for patients. That is a real step forward. Not only do we acknowledge that there is a lottery of care but the NICE programme is the first assault that has ever been made on that lottery in the NHS.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I very much welcome the referral of Aricept and what we hope will be more effective anti-dementia drugs to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, but will the new criterion that NICE must take into account—affordability—prove a handicap to making a proper assessment? We all hope that we will eventually have an effective drug for dementia but the main saving will be not necessarily for the NHS budget but for other Government budgets and, especially, for carers. Who will make the assessment? Will NICE determine whether the drug is affordable, or will Ministers take their proper responsibility?

Mr. Milburn: It is Ministers' job to take responsibility. I and my fellow Ministers will have the final call on all these issues, but it is right and proper for the National

Institute for Clinical Excellence to take into account both clinical and cost-effectiveness, as we made clear from the outset, when we first proposed its establishment.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about Aricept. There is a temptation in the House and elsewhere—I know that he is the last to succumb to it—to suggest that Aricept, or indeed any other drug currently on the market, is a wonder drug that can cure Alzheimer's disease. There is no known cure for Alzheimer's disease.

At best, the evidence seems to suggest that the drug will have limited, if any, effect on the underlying progression of the disease but may have some success in temporarily alleviating the symptoms for some patients. We should not get caught up in all the hype that we read in our newspapers about new wonder drugs coming on the market and solving all these serious and chronic health problems. It is terribly important to keep a sense of discipline and balance about how we handle these issues, as otherwise we hold out false expectations and hopes not only to dementia sufferers but to their relatives and friends.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Given the continued denial of drugs such as Aricept and, for example, beta interferon to patients whose doctors say that they need them but whose health authorities say that they cannot afford them, can the Secretary of State explain what he meant when he told the House that

"no one will be denied the drugs that they need. That is a guarantee"—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 143.]?

Mr. Milburn: That is precisely what we are doing. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman wants to ask another question, he may get up and do so, but I wish to answer his first question before he asks a subsequent one. No one denies that the national health service, just like every other health care system in the world whether public or private, has to set priorities and make hard choices. The issue is not about whether choices have to be made but about how those choices are made.

On that issue, the parties have a clear difference of view. The Conservative party says that the choice should be made according to people's ability to pay, because it wants to force more people out of the NHS and into private health insurance. We say that the choice should be made according to people's ability to benefit, with the job of NICE being to focus growing NHS resources on those treatments that can best improve people's health.

Doctors

6. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): When he will make an announcement about a further increase in the number of doctors in training. [102266]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): In July 1998, the Government announced that intake of medical students in the UK would be increased by about 1,000 places per annum, or 20 per cent. The responsibility for the allocation of places to individual medical schools in England lies with the Higher Education Funding Council for England—HEFCE. Last summer, the HEFCE announced the allocation of approximately 840 new medical school places in England and plans to announce a further allocation in spring next year.

Mrs. Gilroy: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. He will be aware that the team submitting the peninsula medical school bid is working hard to ensure that its bid is of the highest quality so that it can be among the successful next round of bids. Is he also aware that in the south-west peninsula young people are only half as likely as their counterparts elsewhere to enter medical training? Is he further aware that people in the south-west peninsula are 15 per cent. less likely to have access to some of the more complex tertiary medical treatments? Does he agree that Plymouth Derriford's becoming a teaching hospital will help us to address some regional equity issues?

Mr. Denham: I acknowledge the strong representations that my hon. Friend has made on behalf of the peninsula medical school and I had the opportunity to meet her recently to discuss the proposals. Of course I acknowledge the case that has been made to improve health provision and access to care in the south-west, but it is important to say for the record that the responsibility for the decision on the allocation of places lies with the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I welcome the fact that the Government are continuing the policy of their predecessor of increasing the investment in medical training. However, does the Minister recognise that it does not make much sense to increase the number of recruits coming into the medical profession if that number is offset by increasing numbers of people leaving the profession because they are dissatisfied by the terms and the way in which their skills are used in the NHS?

What steps will the Government take to address the problems of medical morale, which have been identified by the British Medical Association, to reduce the number of people leaving the profession, bearing in mind that that is the cheapest way of increasing the total resource available from the medical profession?

Mr. Denham: The rate of retention of trained doctors in the health system in this country is extremely good, and we are pleased about that. The right hon. Gentleman has a bit of a nerve to raise that question but I shall answer it head on. What will maintain the high motivation that we have seen since this Government were elected, and will ensure high morale among medical staff, is continued investment in the NHS at the record rates that the Government have achieved. The best news for everyone working in the NHS is the average of 6.8 per cent. cash increase in funding that we have announced today, because that means that the professional staff working in our health service know that we are keeping our promise year on year to make the resources available to them to deliver the high-quality health services that they want to deliver.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): May I say how pleased I am that the long-awaited undergraduate medical school has been established at Keele university in north Staffordshire? However, will my hon. Friend look carefully at the projected numbers of GPs who are set to

retire? Will he consider linking training with incentives, so that the parts of the country most in need of additional GPs will get trained and qualified doctors?

Mr. Denham: I, too, am pleased that the HEFCE took the decision to make the allocation of medical student places to Keele university. One of the factors taken into account in the decisions over Keele and Birmingham concerned the proposed links with the development of general practice.

The good news is that over the past two years there has been a sharp increase in the number of medical students wanting to train to go into general practice. That will help us to address some of the localised shortages in general practice in some parts of the country. It will also ensure that we will be in a good position to meet the undoubted bulge in the number of GPs approaching retirement age over the next 10 to 15 years. It is therefore very important that medical school training, while remaining properly balanced, should include encouragement for medical students to consider entering general practice. I think that we are witnessing that happening.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Will today's medical students be expected to work excessive hours when they become doctors in training? The Minister will be aware that recent figures from the British Medical Association show that the number of doctors in training working in excess of the new deal has risen sharply. I hope that he will accept from me that that is due to the proper validation of previous figures—doctors are not working longer hours but the old figures were flawed. Has the Minister noticed that figures for the Oxford region, which were done properly, show very little rise? Will he examine that region to work out what has been done well there? I can tell him that if he does, he will find that the reasons for the good figures are planned consultant expansion, proper funding and the effective use of sanctions against trusts and consultants reluctant to change working practices.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The system has to be made tougher in certain parts of the country if we are to reduce the excessive hours worked by some junior doctors. That is why we have made it clear in the past seven days that we will invest an extra £5 million both this year and next to tackle the problem. That money will be made available through the regional task forces.

In addition, we are establishing a much tougher regime to monitor the performance of trusts on their delivery of cuts in the long hours worked by junior doctors. I have also made it clear that we are serious about our readiness to publish details of those trusts that fail to make proper progress on cutting junior doctors' excessive hours.

NHS Walk-in Centres

7. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): What plans he has to increase the number and range of NHS walk–in centres. [102268]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): Walk-in centres are a key part of our plans to modernise and to improve the access to, and the convenience of, NHS services. The first 36 walk-in centre pilots were approved earlier this year. They will begin to open from January 2000, and in the following months.

I am pleased to be able to confirm that one of the first of those 36 centres will be in the constituency of my hon. Friend.

Mr. Cunningham: I welcome the announcement about the walk-in centre for Coventry. I also welcome the additional, above-average cash allocation for Coventry, which contrasts with the record of the previous Conservative Government's treatment of Coventry's health service. Is not this a major step in the right direction—the modernisation of Coventry's health services?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The walk-in centre at the Coventry hospital site in the centre of the city is just one example of the Government's commitment to modernising the national health service in my hon. Friend's area.

In addition, a 7.2 per cent. cash increase in resources for the health authority has been announced for the coming year. The Government have also confirmed that we are determined to go ahead with a brand new hospital and medical school for Coventry.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Will the Minister accept a welcome for the development of walk-in centres? With regard to the normal walk-in centres—GPs' surgeries—will he consider whether special attention should be given to the needs of practices with significant numbers of people over the age of 85 rather than 75? In some areas where the numbers in that age group are at levels which the rest of the country will match in 20 years there are significant delays.

If we are supposed to acknowledge the cash increase at the beginning or end of our questions, I should like to do so for West Sussex. I note, however, that the increase is below the national average. Had there not been an increase, it would have been one of the very few years since the health service was created that one had not been made.

Mr. Denham: The cash increase is running at nearly twice the rate that it did in the last two years of the previous Government's term in office. The scale of the increase is as important as its provision.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about care of the elderly. General practice has an important role to play in providing proper health care for the elderly. Many of the primary care groups and some of the first primary care trusts have identified care of the elderly and the linking of the role of GPs, social services and secondary care as their top priority for the improvement of local services. Over and above that, a number of options are available to local GPs, funded within the health system, to improve health care for the elderly. For example, a number of GPs have made use of personal medical services pilot schemes, and some standard local development schemes are in place. So, there are a number of tools for improving care of the elderly at local level. The issue can be addressed by the local primary care group together with the local health authority.

NHS Direct

8. **Kali Mountford** (Colne Valley): What was each monthly total for calls to NHS Direct since its establishment. [102269]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): In October 1999, NHS Direct handled 109,000 calls. This is the first time that more than 100,000 calls have been handled in one month. By the end of October, NHS Direct had handled more than 700,000 calls. A list of the monthly total of calls since its establishment will be placed in the Library.

Kali Mountford: That is an impressive number by anybody's calculation. I understand that 65,000 callers called NHS Direct in west Yorkshire. However, numbers alone are not the most important issue—the appropriateness of advice is extremely important. One of my constituents—a very close friend—rang NHS Direct when she was feeling queasy and did not want to trouble her GP. She was advised to go to hospital immediately, where she was found to be having a heart attack. I am pleased to say that she is now very well. Is it not the case that NHS Direct is an additional service that allows for the range of NHS services to be used appropriately and effectively?

Ms Stuart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that example of how NHS Direct is an additional service that improves health care delivery. In September alone, some 2,000 callers to NHS Direct were directed to call 999 for an ambulance.

NHS Direct is part of a £100 million accident and emergency modernisation package. People who are directed to A and E receive the appropriate urgent treatment and NHS Direct facilitates that, not only in the Colne valley but across the country.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge the trials for NHS Direct that were set up by the previous Government. We certainly welcome its success. Is the Minister willing to tackle a difficult question? Will putting more money into walk-in centres and NHS Direct, and correctly reducing the load on GPs and casualty departments, mean a change in the funding of GPs in particular when that load is taken off them?

Ms Stuart: I am delighted that the Conservative party is beginning to see the light. Not too long ago, a Conservative Secretary of State called NHS Direct peripheral and irrelevant. It is neither. As for funding, it is a prime example that shows that modernising the NHS means producing facilities that allow patients access to an appropriate level of medical care, whether that is offered by the GP, the hospital or through self-care. The funding formula will respond to the service needs, and NHS Direct is additional to that.

Breast Screening

10. **Ms Linda Perham** (Ilford, North): What plans he has to ensure all women over 65 years old are informed of their right to self-refer for breast screening. [102271]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The availability of screening for older women is widely publicised. In particular, the NHS breast screening programme is working with Age Concern to encourage older women to request screening. It has produced a leaflet, "65 or over: You are still entitled to breast screening", which is widely available from general practitioners' surgeries, clinics, some post offices and some shops.

Ms Perham: I am grateful for that answer, and I welcome the Government's co-operation with Age Concern to publicise the right to self-referral for women aged over 65, who form the group at highest risk. If take-up by older women increases—my local unit in Epping has reported 500 more women from that age group referring themselves over the past four years—will my hon. Friend address the problem of resources available for breast screening services? Of course, I welcome the extra funding that the Government have put into those services.

Yvette Cooper: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her work on raising awareness of breast cancer screening and the rights of older women to self-refer. She is right that the number of older women requesting screening is increasing—from 39,000 in 1994–95 to nearly 75,000 in 1997–98. It is precisely to deal with such issues that the Government have set up working groups to examine work force issues and ensure that we maintain the quality of the screening programme for older women and for those covered by the automated recall programme.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Does the Minister accept that those who are screened and who are unfortunate enough to be found positive may often find relief through changes in diet or complementary techniques, such as traditional Chinese medicine or homeopathy? Will she assure me that those treatments will not be forgotten when she addresses the issue?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that many people, particularly those with severe cancer, seek and can find relief from alternative therapies. The Government certainly take complementary therapies seriously.

Elderly Care (NHS)

11. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): If he will make a statement about the standards of NHS care available to elderly patients. [102272]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The Government are committed to ensuring high standards of care in the national health service for all patients. Our forthcoming national health service framework for older people will set out for the first time new national standards for the treatment and care of older patients. It will be published next year. In the meantime, we have taken action across a number of areas to improve the care of older people. For example, we have extended the annual immunisation programme for influenza to ensure that everyone aged over 75 can

have the flu vaccine free of charge. From 1 April, everyone over 60 has been eligible again for free eye tests, regardless of their income or health status.

Mr. Waterson: Does the Minister accept that Age Concern has concluded that, contrary to existing guidelines, one in 20 older people are denied treatment because of their age? *The Daily Telegraph* has also found that significant numbers of elderly patients are literally being starved to death. Does the Minister accept those findings, and what is he doing about them?

Mr. Hutton: We do not accept the accusation that nurses and doctors are routinely killing patients in the national health service. That ludicrous and absurd allegation strikes directly at the integrity and professionalism of nurses and doctors, and we reject it absolutely. We take criticisms about discrimination on the basis of age in the NHS very seriously. As part of our work on the national health service framework, we are developing new standards on fair access to NHS treatment and care for older patients.

We take the allegations of discrimination seriously, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the steps that we have taken to establish, for example, the new Commission for Health Improvement, which will have a specific role on the implementation of the new framework for older people. Discrimination of any kind is fundamentally unacceptable as it strikes at the principles and ethos on which the NHS was established. Labour established the NHS, and we shall defend those principles.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement on future provision for the care of the elderly. However, I have received a significant number of complaints from my constituents and from people throughout the Wakefield area on the problems being encountered at the Pinderfields and Pontefract hospitals NHS trust. Will the Minister say something about guidelines to the trust? May I welcome the 6.9 per cent. increase in resources for Wakefield health authority, which will help to address the problems of many constituents who have respiratory diseases? A great number of elderly asthma sufferers live in my area, and the increase will help them considerably. Will the Minister issue instructions to hospital trusts on the future care of the elderly?

Mr. Hutton: I certainly want to reassure my hon. Friend about his concerns. We have taken the step of developing new national standards, which will be introduced next year, on the treatment and care of older people in the NHS to allay such anxieties. I also remind him, although I am sure that he needs no reminding of it, that, as part of our work on health action zones in his part of Yorkshire, a particular strand of work is devoted to improving the treatment and care of older people.

We take all those concerns and criticisms very seriously. We want the NHS to provide the highest possible standards of care for older people and to ensure that those with complaints are properly heard and their problems addressed. I reassure my hon. Friend and the House that the Government are determined to ensure the best possible standards of treatment and care for older people, who make up the largest age group that uses the NHS. They represent 16 per cent. of the population, but 40 per cent. of the NHS's resources are devoted to their care.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Is the Minister aware of the concern among my constituents at the way in which East Kent health authority's new blueprint for our hospital service has marginalised care for the elderly? Is he further aware that the excellent Nunnery Fields hospital, which cares for elderly stroke patients, is mentioned directly only once in the document—when an estimate is given of how much money could be realised by selling it?

Mr. Hutton: I am not aware of the particular concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I will look into them on his behalf, but, again, I point out that, as part of our work this year on developing the new national service framework for older people, a specific group is looking particularly at stroke care and treatment. We are doing that important work in consultation with the Stroke Association. We are looking seriously and actively at improving stroke care throughout the country, but I will look into the specific matters that he raised about East Kent health authority.

Heart Bypasses

13. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will make a statement about the average waiting time for heart bypass surgery. [102274]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The average waiting time for heart bypass surgery in the NHS in England in 1997–98, the latest year for which figures are available, was 188 days. We have made it clear that tackling coronary heart diseases is one of the Government's top priorities.

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Will he perhaps explain, or look into, why one of my constituents was told nine months ago that he would have to wait between seven and nine months for such an operation, only to be told a couple of weeks ago that he would have to wait a further 12 months? Is that typical, or is it an unusual case?

Mr. Denham: We all regret it when any patient waiting for a serious operation has that procedure cancelled. I understand that the hon. Gentleman's constituents—I do not know about the individual case that he mentioned—are often treated in Bristol and particular issues there are being addressed by an additional £100,000 of funding for the health authority and the United Bristol Healthcare NHS trust.

More generally, we recognise that the provision of cardiac surgery is simply not good enough at the moment. That is why, just a couple of months ago, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the injection of a further £50 million into the NHS to improve coronary heart services and, in particular, to increase the rate of revascularisation by 10 per cent., with more than 3,000 extra operations over the next two years.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): We welcome the decline in waiting lists in certain areas, although other parts of the country are not as well catered for. With all

the new money going in, are there particular areas that are ahead of themselves in operations and are they able to provide the back-up for those areas where there seems to be scarcity of provision?

Mr. Denham: What is clear is that we inherited wide variations in access to treatment and care in different parts of the country. Indeed, in some parts of the country, there is an inverse relationship between the likelihood of serious coronary heart disease in the community and the likelihood of someone getting a bypass operation. One of the central purposes of the national service framework for coronary heart disease that we intend to publish next year is to set standards of care, from prevention right through to the most serious surgery. We shall expect the national health service to meet those standards, wherever in the country a patient may be. That will need to be backed up with the investment in equipment and in staff announced by my right hon. Friend a couple of months ago.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Minister confirm that, as a result of the reforms introduced in April, any patient who needs a coronary bypass, or any other operation, and who chooses to attend a hospital with a shorter waiting time than the one contracted to his local primary care group, can no longer exercise that choice? Does the Minister agree with the director of the College of Health that, as a result of the Government's reforms, NHS patients now have less choice of hospitals within the NHS than at any time since the health service existed?

Mr. Denham: No. No such choice ever existed for individual patients under the previous Administration. We have swept aside the incredibly bureaucratic system of extra-contractual referrals that required approval before someone could be sent to a particular consultant. We expect that the vast majority of treatments for the vast majority of patients will be provided according to agreements reached locally between the primary care group and the main trust serving that area.

However, in changing the system, we have not removed the right of doctors to refer patients to the consultants that they want. The use of out-of-area treatments is an integral part of the current system. However, it is much better to plan for the vast majority of patients to receive high-quality services in their most local hospital, rather than to use the ridiculous model advocated by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). Under that model, one can receive the best treatment only in a few parts of the country; patients have to chase all over the place to try to find out where the best treatment is available. People want good-quality services in their own local hospital—that is what we want to deliver.

NHS Abortions

14. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What plans he has to review waiting times for NHS abortions. [102275]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The Government are funding the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to undertake an audit of NHS and independent sector abortion services, including information on waiting times. The early findings from that audit will inform the Government's sexual health strategy, which is currently under development.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Is she aware that a recent survey conducted by the Abortion Law Reform Association revealed that the most common reason for women to seek private terminations was unacceptable delays in the NHS? The survey showed that about half the health authorities set or monitor targets for waiting times for terminations. Will she consider the establishment, within the evidence-based framework produced by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, of a target waiting time of 14 to 21 days? Will she ensure that that target is monitored so that women can have access to abortion on the NHS?

Yvette Cooper: I am aware of the survey to which my hon. Friend refers. I assure her that the Government take the matter extremely seriously. I further assure her that the sexual health strategy will consider those issues; it will consider access to all services and how to ensure equity. The report will be produced during the next year.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Has my hon. Friend noticed the existence of an organisation called Precious Life? Thus far, the organisation has confined its activities to Northern Ireland and Scotland. It has attempted to intimidate workers in clinics and now threatens to picket the homes of Ministers of the Scottish Parliament. Does my hon. Friend agree with the Minister for Health and Community Care in the Scottish Parliament that any activities that attempt to prevent people from carrying out lawful functions will be met with the full force of the law?

Yvette Cooper: I can certainly confirm that the Government condemn any form of intimidation that prevents the full operation of the law.

Erythropoetin

17. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will make a statement on the availability of erythropoetin for patients suffering from anaemia and chronic renal failure. [102278]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Decisions about the provision of erythropoetin should be based on the clinical needs of individual patients. There are, however, no national guidelines or protocols issued by the Department of Health specifically on prescribing erythropoetin.

Mr. Brady: I thank the Minister for his reply. If my constituents reside in the Salford and Trafford health authority area and are told by the Manchester royal infirmary that they have a clinical need for erythropoetin, they are denied it as a matter of course. However, if they live across the border in the Manchester health authority area, they will receive it. The Secretary of State says that he wants to end the lottery of care, so will the Minister now undertake to do that?

Mr. Hutton: I am aware of the particular concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised and to which the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), replied in February. My understanding is that the local health authority and the trust are working to establish a proper mechanism for prescribing erythropoetin, and I very much hope that an understanding will be reached soon. I think that there was a meeting yesterday to discuss the matter.

The hon. Gentleman raised a wider point that several other Conservative Members have mentioned today. Again, I point out that such problems of availability did not start on 1 May 1997. The difference between the Government whom he supported and this Government is that we have put in place a fairer system of resolving the issues and it will address the concerns of his constituents. I hope that he will recognise that additional resources have been made available to his health authority to date. However, sadly, he conspicuously failed to mention that.

Venezuela

12.31 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow)(*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on assistance to Venezuela.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Torrential rain over the last week has caused serious flooding and mudslides in the 10 coastal states of northern Venezuela, including the capital, Caracas, and particularly Vargas state. Flooding began on 13 December but was at its most devastating last Thursday when mudslides struck in the early hours of the morning, catching many shanty town dwellers asleep.

The latest reports from the Government of Venezuela indicate that about 7,000 people are dead though, sadly, that figure is expected to increase significantly. A high proportion of those killed were from the shanty towns of Caracas and Vargas state where the poor have been marginalised on steep, crowded slopes that are vulnerable to flooding and landslides. At present, there are still about 10,000 people missing. Approximately 150,000 people are directly affected, and of these about 100,000 are homeless. Whole communities are reported to have been washed away.

Detailed assessments are now under way, but they have been hampered by the problems of getting to some disaster areas. However, early reports indicate widespread physical damage. Basic services such as power, water, sanitation, health and communications have been severely disrupted. Some key roads and bridges have been destroyed. Caracas airport is open to relief flights only. Although the weather has now cleared, further rain, sadly, has been forecast for the coming days. If that materialises, it is feared that a further 100,000 people could be affected. As a precaution, the Venezuelan authorities are planning temporary evacuations.

My Department is in close touch with the Venezuelan Government and with international agencies to determine how best we should respond. We are following our normal approach of supporting agencies with an established presence and a track record in the region—those who have assessed the needs and those who have the capacity to deliver. We have agreed that our initial support of £500,000 will be channelled through the International Federation of the Red Cross, the Pan American Health Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund. We are continuing to monitor the situation closely and we stand ready to respond further. I shall be meeting the Venezuelan ambassador later today to discuss the issue.

Mr. Dalyell: As chairman of the all-party Latin America group, I extend my deepest sympathy to the people of Venezuela.

Will it be possible to provide at very short notice some help to the homeless people in the shanty towns? I do not think that it is helpful to try to say anything more about my hon. Friend's remarks except that Mr. Chadderton-Ramos is well known to members of the all-party Latin America group; and we wish him well in his constructive work.

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks on behalf of the whole House when he expresses our sympathy to those who have lost relatives and friends in this terrible tragedy. As I said, about 100,000 people are homeless and have lost everything. They were initially housed in football stadiums and Government buildings, but I can tell my hon. Friend that camps are now being set up on the outskirts of Caracas, managed by the Venezuelan Government authorities and the UN disaster management team. We have indicated that if they need any help with temporary shelters, we will certainly give that serious consideration.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I welcome the opportunity briefly to discuss this terrible tragedy. Although Venezuela is not one of the poorest countries in the world, this is a genuine tragedy, and the scenes on television last night were distressing for us all. We certainly join others in sending our sympathy to those who have suffered loss in this natural disaster. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) has already written to the Venezuelan ambassador, advising him of our strong sympathy and support.

I welcome the financial contribution that the Government have already made. Will the Minister keep a close watch on how the situation develops over Christmas to see how we can make a particular contribution and a difference? Has he yet been notified of any United Kingdom citizens who have been caught up in the flooding or who are casualties of the disaster?

The Minister will now be aware of the public appeal launched by the Red Cross for £500,000, which is specifically for tents, tarpaulins and blankets. Will he welcome that appeal? Does he agree that the British public have demonstrated their great compassion many times already this year and that they will doubtless rise to the occasion again?

The Minister will be aware that there will be a Disasters Emergency Committee meeting at 1.30 pm today, to decide whether British charities will be launching a joint appeal. I appreciate that the appeal is a matter for the charities, not for him, but does he have any advice or thoughts for them?

I want simply to confirm that Conservative Members will support any reasonable action that the Minister deems appropriate to help the people of Venezuela at this time.

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support and the manner in which he has expressed it. I give him an absolute assurance that I shall personally keep a close watch on the situation. As I said, officials of the Department are in close touch with the Venezuelan Government and the international agencies, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will keep my eye on the situation over the recess and take any necessary action.

I am not aware of any UK citizens who are involved. The information is sketchy at present, but we will certainly keep that in mind. Our ambassador in Venezuela, Mr. Wilkinson, is obviously keeping in close touch on that matter.

The hon. Gentleman mentions that the Disasters Emergency Committee is meeting this afternoon, and I welcome that. Of course he is right to say that it might not be appropriate for me to make any particular

[Mr. Foulkes]

recommendation, but if it were appropriate, I might encourage the committee to set up an appeal because this is a tragedy of immense proportions.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): My hon. Friend is right to say that this is an immense tragedy, the victims of which are among the most marginalised people in Venezuela. I know that the Venezuelan Government do not believe that they have the capacity to deal with the situation without an enormous amount of outside help. I was pleased to hear of the actions already taken by this Government, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on that.

There are, however, certain types of help that Britain, through experience, has become particularly good at providing. My hon. Friend had direct experience of that last year, when the use of British troops in the Caribbean was extremely valuable and gave people in a disaster situation an enormous sense of solidarity. Could we consider deploying troops stationed in the Caribbean? Britain also has particular expertise in the use of Bailey bridges, which could be used in the reconstruction of Venezuela, which needs to start now, not in the future.

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. He knows the area very well, having served in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with great distinction as a Minister of State, when he dealt particularly with Latin America.

We have considered whether troops or other Ministry of Defence facilities could be deployed. In particular, we considered using the West India guardship. It is 10 days' sailing away, so it could not provide immediate assistance. The Venezuelan navy, however, has two warships off the coast. If we are asked to deploy military assets—I shall be discussing this with the ambassador this afternoon—we shall certainly give that sympathetic consideration, although, of course, the United States has considerably greater military assets and is considerably closer for immediate deployment. We shall certainly consider any request along those lines.

I am now slightly better informed than I was a few minutes ago and can tell the House that our current information is that there are no British citizens caught in the disaster.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I apologise for my voice.

My party would also like to join the House in expressing sympathy at the recent horror in Venezuela—the last of a long string of disasters that has been inflicted on the people of the world this year.

In the shorter term, what is the state of our humanitarian aid budget? We have not had any assessment of it recently, so the House would be interested to know just how we are affording aid. Secondly, in the longer term, a written answer to a question that I tabled a week or so ago stated that, after the disasters in Nicaragua and Honduras, an international group for reconstruction and transformation of central America was set up to consider the sort of issues that the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) mentioned concerning capacity, good governance and preparing for disasters. Is anything similar envisaged for Venezuela?

Mr. Foulkes: On the latter point, we have no immediate information, but I shall look into that and write to the hon Lady. Regrettably, there has been a long string of disasters this year; the number has been astonishing. As for our budget, funds are not a problem. Our decisions will be made on the basis of need and not on what is in the budget. We shall provide what is needed for the people and what we are able to provide—not financially but physically.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the people of Venezuela who have been generous in their support of peoples in other countries who are less fortunate than themselves? What discussions are taking place in the European Union to ensure that support is mobilised across Europe?

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Venezuelan Government have been quick to respond to other disasters. That is why the whole international community has responded very quickly to this one. There has been immense support from international agencies and other countries. Our contribution is one of very many. We are discussing it with our colleagues in the EU to see what funds can be made available from the European Community Humanitarian Office and other organisations.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I am sure that the Minister will agree that prevention is always better than cure, but does he agree that the disaster in Venezuela, as in Honduras, was exacerbated by intense farming on hillsides and the removal of trees and other natural vegetation, which encouraged the landslip? It was not just the bad weather that was to blame. Does he also agree that there is considerable expertise in British universities and other academic institutions in such work? Is there anything that his Department can do, once the immediate tragedy is dealt with, to advise Venezuela and, indeed, other countries around the globe that are liable to such disasters? If the right sort of vegetation were planted so that mudslides were less likely, the effect of such disasters may be mitigated.

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Gentleman is very perceptive, as usual. He is absolutely right to point out that this disaster is worse than it might have been, owing to deforestation and other policies that have resulted in greater devastation. That was so in Honduras, Nicaragua and Orissa, too. The work for which he is asking is already being done by our Department. We have a major natural resources programme. I recently visited the Natural Resources Institute in Chatham to discuss the work in detail with representatives from all the universities that are conducting it. The hon. Gentleman is right, but I am glad to say that we are ahead of him in thinking of it.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): I am sure that my friends in Venezuela, who have already contacted me asking for help, will consider the Government's response appropriate as a first response. Does my hon. Friend agree that anyone who has seen the shanty towns of Caracas, built as they are on the steep-sided slopes, will have thought that this was a disaster that has been waiting to happen for many years? Given that Venezuela is a country of great extremes of wealth, will my hon. Friend find an

appropriate moment to urge the Venezuelan authorities, when they rebuild, not to replace like with like, but to look for ways in which the shanty occupants of Caracas can be helped in the long term?

Mr. Foulkes: Again, my hon. Friend has touched on an important point. It is sad that the poorest often suffer in natural disasters, as well as suffering regularly. Our entire programme, the theme of our White Paper and the basis of all our work is poverty eradication, which is so vital. In Latin America, countries that have a relatively high per capita income nevertheless have huge inequalities, masked by the per capita income. The Inter-American Development Bank recently produced a report on inequality and poverty in Latin America. Venezuela and other Latin American countries must come to terms with that. We are encouraging and helping them to do so.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): It is more than two days since news of the disaster came in, and only this afternoon are the charities getting together to consider their response. I corresponded earlier in the year with the Minister's Department about setting up a national emergency number that the public can ring to make donations.

My office this morning made five telephone calls to the Department. On the first three occasions, staff did not know to whom donations could be made. The fourth call was answered by an answering machine. Only on the fifth call was it suggested that donations should be made to the British Red Cross.

Ordinary members of the public would not have access to those telephone numbers, and they do not know where to make their contribution. We need a national emergency line for events on this scale for people to contact and make their donations immediately when they see the terrible pictures of the world's disasters.

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which I hope the Disasters Emergency Committee will consider. Obviously, this afternoon the committee will be dealing with the immediate disaster, and rightly so because it is so urgent. However, it is always easy to be wise after an event. The gravity of the situation in Venezuela has escalated. The flooding got worse as the rainfall increased. It was not until Saturday that the scale of the disaster was known. To be fair to the Disasters Emergency Committee, it is responding quickly, as soon as it knew the scale of the disaster and what was needed.

Millennium Preparedness

12.48 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement about our preparations and arrangements for the period around the millennium. This coming new year poses particular challenges, and I therefore felt it right that I should let the House know about the arrangements.

My right hon. Friend the President of the Council made a statement to the House last week on action that the United Kingdom has already taken and on its preparedness for the date change. The House was, I believe, reassured by her statement. The United Kingdom is one of the best prepared countries in the world. However, my right hon. Friend the President of the Council also warned about complacency. Problems may still occur, and we need to be ready to deal with them.

Alongside potential millennium bug problems, there is the possibility of public disorder and other general difficulties. Celebrations on any new year's eve can produce crowd-related problems. There is obviously an increased risk this year because of the additional number of events that will be held, some of which will attract very large numbers of people.

To ensure that people can celebrate this special occasion in safety, a great deal of careful preparation and planning has been carried out by the police, fire, ambulance and other emergency services and by central Government's emergency planning staff. That has been co-ordinated nationally through the civil contingencies committee, which I chair. Its members include Ministers from all key Departments, representatives of the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Administration, the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Metropolitan police. The committee held an important exercise to test the systems as early as last May. Since the summer, it has met regularly to oversee and review operational readiness in the public services.

We want to ensure that millennium celebrations across the country are conducted safely and that, if anything goes wrong, our emergency services can cope effectively. The emergency services are ready to deal with problems at any time. However, we have needed to ensure that those services could cope with a potentially heavier load and a wider range of problems at the end of this year.

The police service will be in a very high state of readiness. The police national information centre at New Scotland Yard will receive information from every police force in the country. That is important because of the large scale of celebrations across the country. We know of major events in 22 cities. Special events will take place in most other cities, towns and villages. The fire and ambulance services will also be in an enhanced state of readiness. To cope with all that, the police service across the country has decided to cancel leave; additional ambulance and fire service personnel will also be on duty.

I pay tribute to all those from the emergency services who will give up their time with their families and friends to ensure that everyone else can enjoy the celebrations on new year's eve.

The celebrations in London will attract the largest numbers. To help ensure safety on the streets of central London, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis

[Mr. Jack Straw]

has declared a traffic limitation zone for an area covering the west end, the City and the south bank and a separate zone in parts of Greenwich. The main central London zone will be in operation from the afternoon of 31 December until the early hours of 1 January; it will be dismantled progressively as deemed sensible by the police.

Residents and those with businesses in the traffic limitation zone will be allowed to travel by vehicle in it, but those seeking access by vehicle are asked to carry company letters of reference or other identification, a resident's parking permit or proof of address. There will be no restrictions on pedestrians or pedal cyclists. Disabled car drivers who hold an orange badge will be able to enter and park, including on single and double yellow lines where they are not causing an obstruction. Specific roads—those closest to the river where the crowds will be thickest—will not be accessible by vehicle at all. Large numbers of people will come into the city centre and, apart from the disabled who are not in a position to do so, everyone is advised to use public transport. There will be enhanced public transport arrangements, not only to get people safely into the centre of London but to get them out again in the early hours of the morning.

In Scotland, a torchlight parade will take place in Edinburgh—one of 60 events there. Glasgow will hold a range of events, as will Aberdeen and surrounding towns. There will be a major fireworks display in Dundee. Major events in Cardiff and Swansea will include a lantern procession as well as a major pop concert at the Millennium stadium in Cardiff. There will also be major events in Belfast city centre and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. A wide variety of events will take place across England—for example, fireworks and giant video screens in Birmingham and Coventry, a lantern procession and open air rink in Bristol, a street festival in Brighton, and quayside fireworks in Newcastle.

In our planning, we have had to take account of the potential impact of some apparently unrelated issues. For example, it is anticipated that several million extra mobile telephones will be sold in the last few weeks of this year. It is highly probable that many mobile phones will be used around midnight on new year's eve as people who are out seek to ring family or friends at home or abroad. High levels of use could swamp the system. The public telecommunications operators and the emergency services have therefore put in place arrangements to manage the networks in such circumstances. There are other arrangements, too, such as the Government's own alternative emergency communications network, which connects central and local government, and the police and fire services and the military, with each other.

Alongside those detailed preparations by the emergency services and others, the Government have an extensive set of arrangements in place to monitor events and to involve Ministers if decisions need to be taken centrally. A Government millennium centre and emergency planning and information officers will operate on a 24-hour basis, and I and a number of my colleagues across government will be on duty over the period. The civil contingencies committee will meet on new year's eve and again on new year's morning. Our hope is that people across the United Kingdom will be able to enjoy the millennium celebrations safely, but the House, I am sure, will share our view that it has been right to undertake the planning and preparation that I have outlined.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and for his courtesy in letting me see a copy of it in advance. I have a number of questions, about both the national emergency planning arrangements for the millennium holiday and the specific issue of how those matters should be handled in central London. I shall deal with the national issues first.

As the Home Secretary made clear, large-scale celebrations are planned not only in London. What audit has his Department made of local and regional emergency plans, and is he satisfied that local authorities and other agencies are prepared and equipped to cope should a genuine emergency arise during the new year period? Can he say a word about the costs of the operation for the police and fire services? Can he confirm that most police forces and fire services have already cancelled all leave for officers and civilians from 31 December until 3 January? What assessment has he made of the cost of that in overtime for the police and fire services? Can he assure the House that providing that cover during the millennium holiday period will not be paid for by cuts in response times and beat policing later in the new year? We know that a certain amount of additional grant has already been made available to the Metropolitan police, but is it still open to other police authorities to apply to the Home Office for additional assistance to cope with the particular duties that will arise during the millennium holiday?

The Home Secretary commented on the arrangements in central London. Can he give the House additional information about what he meant when he said that there are contingency plans to manage the mobile telephone networks? Clearly, mobile phones could be important for summoning assistance in the case of an accident or injury to an individual or if people attending the celebrations become aware of disorder or a problem elsewhere in central London and want to find out what they should do in such circumstances. How will those possibilities be managed in practice? May I impress on him and his colleagues the importance of making sure that they give high priority to providing public information up to and during the millennium celebrations? Members of the public will expect such information to be available, and there is complete support from Members in all parts of the House for making it so.

The Home Secretary commented on traffic management and the large number of visitors to central London expected on new year's eve. Obviously there is a difficult balance to strike between ensuring public safety and allowing as much free movement as possible through the centre of the capital city to people and vehicles. What is his planning assumption about the expected number of visitors to the millennium celebrations? There have been a great many different reports in the media about the number of visitors expected. The planning assumption adopted by the Home Secretary will obviously be important in that it will enable us to assess whether our preparations are appropriate.

Can the Home Secretary confirm that workers in central London and central London residents will be restricted to 50 or 60 vehicle checkpoints if they want to enter the traffic limitation zone on new year's eve? Is there not a

risk of gridlock immediately beyond entry and exit points? What instructions are being given to police officers who will have the difficult job of checking the credentials of people seeking to enter the zone, and how will that problem of management be dealt with?

What will be the position of those who have been invited to central London as the guests of residents? Will they be expected to produce a proof of identity, or a letter of invitation? Is there a risk of differences of opinion at the checkpoints? Presumably much will be left to the discretion of police officers on duty at the checkpoints, but I should be grateful if the Home Secretary would tell us how he intends the problem to be tackled.

Another potential problem is posed by the fact that all the main centres of worship in central London—Westminster abbey, Westminster cathedral, St. Paul's cathedral and Southwark cathedral—are within the traffic limitation zone. Orange badge holders are to be given access, but no exemption appears to be planned for elderly people who would normally use their cars to attend a millennium eve service in those churches. I am sure that even the Home Secretary would not wish the abiding image of the millennium eve to be an image of elderly and infirm people struggling up the escalators at tube stations, and then hiking some distance to their place of worship, while Cabinet Ministers can swan into Westminster tube station and enter their specially commissioned tube train.

I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute—in my case, on behalf of the Opposition—to all members of the emergency services and to the civil servants who will give up their holidays to ensure that adequate plans are in place to ensure the safety and enjoyment of the British public. We all hope that those plans have been well thought through, and that the emergency plans will not need to be implemented.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman asked whether the local and regional emergency plans had been audited. They have been tested, to the extent that we have been able to test them. This is an exercise in predicting the unpredictable. We hope very much that the arrangements will work and that we have anticipated everything that could go wrong, but what happens remains to be seen. No doubt I shall have to make a further statement as soon as the House reconvenes after the Christmas recess if the plans do not work out as intended, but the emergency services, local authorities and others have put a huge amount of work into the exercise, with the aim of ensuring that people can enjoy the millennium safely and without risk.

I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a precise figure for the cost of the operation. He is right to say that an additional allocation was made to the Metropolitan police in the current budget to cover the extra costs. All police leave has been cancelled, but all fire service leave has not—staff who are at home will be on call and will report for duty if the need arises.

I do not expect there to be an impact on the general occupational capability of the police service. I cannot stop a police force outside London claiming an exceptional grant to cover additional costs, but I am not encouraging it. By definition, the police service is an emergency response service, and money to deal with contingencies of all kinds is built into its budgets.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about plans for the management of mobile telephones. The telephone service operates in such a way that should the whole service become swamped, mobile telephone operators are able to protect telephone services used by the emergency services. Although I quite understand that people may wish to use their mobile telephones to call the emergency services, the experience of the emergency services is that, because of mobile telephones, they often receive multiple calls—sometimes running into scores, occasionally into hundreds—about the same incident. However, save in very exceptional circumstances, if citizens' mobile telephones go out of service for a time, the usual arrangements for land lines—there are a huge number of call boxes in all our major cities—should apply.

I am glad that the hon. Member was rather more balanced in his remarks on traffic management than the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) was yesterday. There is plainly a balance to be achieved between public safety and ensuring vehicular access for those who need it. However, we have made arrangements for the disabled, and Westminster city council—which is in the lead on the matter—has, very unusually, lifted its restrictions on orange badge holders parking on double yellow lines, when it is safe to do so, and on single yellow lines.

The disabled apart, those who are able to walk to and from their cars—in normal circumstances, people would have a very long walk from their cars to any celebrations, including to church services—should be able to use the very extensive public transport services available at the millennium in London and in some other cities. I therefore do not anticipate the difficulties that the hon. Gentleman suggested.

I invite people going to dinner parties in central London—even those who are going to the dinner parties of Opposition Members—to make use of the bus or tube, as Cabinet Ministers will be doing.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman endorsed my thanks to members of the emergency services, who, as I said, will be giving up their time with their family and friends to enable the rest us to enjoy our time with our family and friends.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My right hon. Friend will be aware that emergency planning has a high priority in constituencies such as mine that contain major hazards. He is also aware of the tremendous work done by Cheshire fire service in providing back-up. During millennium activities, the Cheshire fire service will be partially diverted to population centres where celebrations will be held. Is my right hon. Friend therefore satisfied that there will be sufficient first-line support in the private sector operations containing major hazards?

Mr. Straw: The judgment on fire cover is best left—indeed, it is left—to chief fire officers in each area. I have had no specific reports about the circumstances in Cheshire, but I have no reason to believe that the usual arrangements to ensure the highest levels of co-operation between the Cheshire fire service and, particularly, firms in the petrochemical industry in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere in Cheshire are not in hand for the millennium period.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and join him in

[Mr. Tom Brake]

thanking the emergency services for forgoing time with their family and friends during this important celebration. I also thank him for being on call himself during that period.

The Home Secretary's statement prompts various questions. First, has he had any discussions with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about Southern Aviation of Zambia and Gulf Air which, last Thursday, were the two airlines that had failed to provide any information about their millennium compliance?

Secondly, will the Home Secretary confirm whether the £50 million cost of the policing arrangements that were listed in *The Times* on Saturday is correct? If so, where will that £50 million, which is significantly more than the £35 million that has so far been set aside for the 5,000 new officers, come from?

Thirdly, what discussions has the Home Secretary had with the train operating companies in the last couple of days? He will have seen the *Evening Standard* and know that Connex has said that it will not provide the millennium service. What is he going to do to make sure that it does? What will he do about contingency arrangements if party-poopers decide to pull the plug on that service at the last moment?

Finally, will the Home Secretary be giving anyone a mobile phone at Christmas? If so, what advice will he give about using that phone on new year's eve or new year's day?

Mr. Straw: I understand that Gulf Air has been accepted as safe, and the Zambian airline to which the hon. Gentleman referred is not flying in or out of the United Kingdom.

It is difficult to make a precise assessment of the policing costs of the millennium. We have made a special allocation to the Metropolitan police for this year, but it is in the nature of things that we will not know the full costs until after the event.

I have had no personal conversations with the train operating companies—in particular, Connex—although I did see the *Evening Standard* yesterday. I have read and digested an excellent publication from London Transport and the train operating companies called "Seeing in the New Millennium" which gives details of every train service in and out of London before new year's eve and on new year's day. I am sure that any changes to that will be announced.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said that only 60 access and egress points would be available for the zone and that gridlock could occur. Of course there may be traffic jams around the zone. However, if the hon. Gentleman looks at the zone, he will see that there are not more than 60 access and egress points in any event—only about 60 streets usually give access to the whole of the zone.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) asked me to disclose the nature of my Christmas presents. These are a secret between myself and Father Christmas.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I take it that the safety needs of those employed in the maritime industry have not been overlooked, as seafarers will be going about their work during the millennium period.

My right hon. Friend sensibly encourages people to use public transport to attend the huge events in Glasgow, Edinburgh, London and, presumably, Blackburn and Greenock. Might not it make good sense to waive fares between 7 pm on new year's eve and 7 am on new year's day? The city of Sydney has followed such a policy for many years, and it works exceedingly well, especially by positively deterring car drivers from coming into the city.

Mr. Straw: Maritime safety is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and Regions. Clearly, arrangements have been put in place.

Given his anxieties about the matter, my hon. Friend may wish to know that special arrangements have been tested in respect of safety on the Thames. There will be 32 patrol boats from the police, the Port of London authority and others patrolling the river, instead of the usual handful. Other boat traffic will cease for the key period, and cruise operators and others have been informed of what is expected of them. There has been an independent risk audit and five exercises involving the police, fire and ambulance services, the PLA and the London boroughs in respect of safety on the Thames.

Free travel is a matter for the public transport operators in co-operation with those who fund them. In London, all tube, bus and docklands light railway services from 23.50 on Friday 31 December to 9 am on Saturday 1 January will be free. However, it is stressed that one must have a valid travel ticket at all other times.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) referred to the difficult balancing act for the Home Secretary in relation to restrictions and security. Does the Home Secretary recall the problems in the autumn when all kinds of travel restrictions were talked about and a massive media campaign warned people about the difficulties in Cornwall—I speak as a Cornishman rather than a Leicestershire Member on this point—which resulted in a collapse in the number of people who went there? It was a fiasco for the county.

I am worried that some of my constituents in Hinckley may have second thoughts about coming to London because of concerns about whether they can get out of Euston or St. Pancras. They may wonder whether the traffic will simply be stopped at a certain point on the M1 or the M40. The Home Secretary owes those of us in the midlands a reassurance that every effort will be made to ensure that the traffic flows properly off the M1 and the M40, that there are overspill car parks and that those travelling by train will actually get there. If there is a tiny disturbance at Euston, will the whole east coast main line shut down for the millennium?

Will the Home Secretary advertise the special services that are to be offered on new year's eve?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman talked about the eclipse in the autumn; I think that it took place on

11 August. There was a lower attendance than anticipated, but that is in the nature of events. We cannot entirely predict human behaviour.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): It was raining.

Mr. Straw: I recall that it rained in Cornwall under the previous Administration, too. These days, we live not in a command economy but in a world of private enterprise, albeit informed by policies of social justice. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] It is called the third way. People cannot be directed to enjoy themselves, even if that is antithetical to Conservative Members. Facilities are laid on and people are invited to take part, but they make their own choices.

I was asked earlier about the size of the crowds. There will be large crowds. It is only an estimate, but the Government office for London put the number at between 1.5 million and 2 million people. By definition, there will be very large crowds. Those who do not like crowds should not come into London.

The hon. Gentleman also asked whether we could abolish traffic jams just for new year's eve. Just as it rained under the previous Administration, there were traffic jams then, too. One absolute certainty—I promise it—is that, whoever wins the next general election, and the one after that and the one after that, there will occasionally be traffic jams and gridlock.

The purpose of the traffic limitation zone and all the arrangements in respect of public transport is to ensure that the maximum number of people can get into and out of central London in the greatest possible safety and that it is safe for people to walk about and enjoy themselves there. I understand Conservative Members' attachment to the motor car, but they need to bear in mind the fact that 90 per cent. of day-by-day journeys into central London are on public transport, so this is well within people's experience.

One final point for those who are concerned about accuracy: the hon. Gentleman asked whether, if there was trouble at Euston, the east coast main line would be affected. The answer is no, because that line runs into King's Cross.

Point of Order

1.19 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Following your ruling on 14 May 1997 about the oath of allegiance and access to the services of the House, I was surprised and alarmed to read in *The Sunday Times* this weekend that

"Sinn Fein MPs Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are to be given offices in Westminster without having to swear the oath of allegiance to the Queen . . . Betty Boothroyd, the Speaker, is finalising the details."

The article went on to say:

"Boothroyd's concession is part of the delicate choreography of 'confidence building measures' designed by George Mitchell . . . Boothroyd will justify her change of heart on the basis of the new devolved administration at Stormont . . . The Commons authorities have been pressured into making the gesture by Downing Street. 'These are elected MPs voted in by their constituents,' one senior source said."

The Times today states:

"It is understood that Betty Boothroyd, the Speaker, has dug in her heels to prevent a breach of the general rule that MPs who do not swear allegiance to the Queen cannot have access to Westminster facilities. But Miss Boothroyd is reported to accept the Government's view that allowing the two MPs to have offices at Westminster could be seen as part of the 'confidence-building' measures."

One aspect of those stories is certainly true—that the deal, if there is one, will horrify some Tories, and that includes me.

What is going on? Have you, Madam Speaker, been put under any pressure by Downing street; and could you confirm that if you have been—or are in the future—put under any pressure by the Executive to change your ruling of 14 May 1997 unilaterally, the request would be met with the dusty response that Members of this House would expect from you?

Madam Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not believe everything that he reads in the press, but he is correct in recalling May 1997, when I informed the House of my decision that Members who do not take their seats should not have access to the facilities of the House. This summer, the European Court of Human Rights rejected on all counts a challenge to that decision. It is true to say that one or two Ministers have been to see me recently. The House would not expect me to divulge any conversations. Others may divulge conversations of that nature; I do not. Should Ministers now wish the two Sinn Fein Members to have access to some of our facilities, it would be for the Government to bring a motion to that effect for debate and decision by the House. I am the servant of the House and if it approved such a motion, I would of course ensure that it was put into effect.

BILL PRESENTED

DISQUALIFICATIONS

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Secretary Mandelson and Mr. Mike O'Brien, presented a Bill to remove the disqualification for membership of the House of Commons and the Northern Ireland Assembly of persons who are members of the legislature of Ireland

(the Oireachtas); and to disqualify for Ministerial office in Northern Ireland persons who are or become Ministers of the Government of Ireland: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on 10 January 2000, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 41].

Public Expenditure

1.22 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the action taken by this Government to build a platform of stability for the British economy, in contrast to the boom and bust of the past; welcomes the new monetary policy framework put in place by this Government, which is delivering stability and steady growth; notes that the Conservative Party opposes Bank of England independence; welcomes the new public spending framework which is delivering an additional £40 billion for health and education; notes that the Conservative Party is opposed to this extra investment; welcomes the fact that this Government is doubling public sector net investment after so many years of neglect; welcomes this Government's programme of reform in the public services and thanks public and voluntary sector workers for their contribution to delivering strong public services for all.

It will not have escaped your attention, Madam Speaker, that despite the fact that the Opposition were keen to have this debate in Government time, only four Conservative Back Benchers have turned up. That speaks volumes for their lack of confidence in the positions they take on the issue.

This is the last major debate to be held on the Floor of the House this century and we have an opportunity to discuss the Government's modernisation of our public finances and public services. However, we should also take a look at the past couple of decades and the Conservatives' record on public expenditure. When we came to office we inherited not some golden economic legacy, as Conservative Members would have us believe, but an economy flawed by serious and fundamental weaknesses.

Britain was set to repeat the same old cycle of Tory boom and bust. Inflation was set to rise sharply above target, borrowing had risen to £28 billion and the national debt had doubled. Just servicing that debt cost the British taxpayer some £25 billion every year, or more than is spent on schools, or on housing and law and order put together. Over the previous economic cycle, Tory budget deficits totalled a staggering £149 billion. The last Tory Government also managed to deliver the highest level of public sector borrowing since the second world war—some £50 billion, or 8 per cent. of gross domestic product.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I have made this point before in the House, but the right hon. Gentleman is new to his job and obviously does not yet know the facts. The Conservative Government were just about the only Government in the world during their nearly 20 years of office to reduce the debt stock as a proportion of GDP. Every other country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development saw an increase in its debt stock. The Chief Secretary's remarks merely reflect one point in the business cycle—a cycle that he claims he will abolish.

Mr. Smith: It may be one mere point to the hon. Gentleman, but that £25 billion could and should have been spent on public services. Our first priority was to deliver a platform of economic stability and to leave behind the boom and bust of the past.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): My right hon. Friend might be interested to know that the chief

economist of the National Westminster bank recently told me that interest rates in the previous economic cycle ranged between 7 and 15 per cent., but in this cycle the range is between 5 and 7 per cent. That means that the peak under this Government is the same as the trough under the previous Government. Does not that underline the fact that we have got rid of boom-and-bust economics, partly through giving independence to the Bank of England, and partly through the prudence of the Treasury team?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Securing economic stability is the essential precondition to delivering the high growth and employment that the Government want to achieve. As my hon. Friend noted, we took courageous steps: we put in place a new, modern monetary policy framework and we made the Bank of England operationally independent, thus ensuring that decisions on interest rates are taken in the best long-term interests of the economy, not for short-term political reasons. We also set a clearly defined and symmetrical inflation target.

I remind the House that the Conservative party remains opposed to the Government's monetary policy framework and Bank of England independence. The Conservatives threaten to take Britain back to the bad old days of Tory boom and bust.

We have also put in place an equally coherent and modern fiscal and public spending framework, based on clear fiscal rules. Our first and golden rule is that we balance the budget over the cycle. Secondly, our sustainable investment rule means that we borrow only for investment and that, as we do so, debt is held to a prudent and stable level.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Will the Chief Secretary clarify for me a point of information that I find continually interesting? He makes a measurement across an economic cycle: where are we on that cycle now, and when will it end?

Mr. Smith: The calculation of where we are in the cycle is performed against a baseline, and the Government's figures are independently audited by the National Audit Office. That is part of the transparent and accountable fiscal framework that the Government introduced to replace the irresponsibility and boom and bust of the Tory years.

Our policy making is transparent to an unparalleled degree. In monetary policy, the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee operates an open system of decision taking, publishing minutes and votes and reporting in full to Parliament. The same openness and disclosure are evident in fiscal policy. Key fiscal assumptions are independently audited, and far more information than ever before is published to ensure properly informed debate and scrutiny.

That rigorous adherence to the new fiscal framework is delivering significant results already. As a result of our prudent and cautious assumptions, which are audited by the National Audit Office, we are firmly on course to balance the budget over the cycle. We are therefore firmly on track to meeting the first of our fiscal rules, which I earlier termed the golden rule.

The Government believe that the second fiscal rule—the sustainable investment rule—can also be realised. Other things being equal, we believe it desirable to reduce the debt ratio to below 40 per cent. of gross domestic product, so that debt is at a sustainable and prudent level.

National debt doubled under the previous Government. By contrast, over the past three years, debt as a share of national income has fallen from 44 per cent. to 42 per cent. It is estimated that it will fall to 38.2 per cent. at the end of this financial year, and to 37 per cent. in the following year. Over the economic cycle, therefore, the Government are on course to keep debt below 40 per cent. of our national income, so we are firmly on track to meet the second fiscal rule, too.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): In this spirit of transparency over fiscal matters, will the Chief Secretary confirm that the burden of taxation has transparently risen by 2 per cent. of gross domestic product since his party came to power?

Mr. Smith: I took Conservative Members through this last Thursday. We can go through it again, but I will not allow them to make the charge that the tax burden is rising. Let me give the figures again for tax and social security as a share of GDP: last year it was 37.4 per cent., this year it is 37 per cent. and next year it will be 36.8 per cent. The tax rate is falling, not rising.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): If the Minister is so keen to give us these fiddled figures yet again for a two-year period, can he quote a single independent economist who agrees with him that—apparently—the rate of tax as a percentage of GDP will have fallen by the end of this Parliament? Can the right hon. Gentleman name a single economist who agrees with the premise that he is trying to peddle yet again?

Mr. Smith: I know of not one economist, independent or otherwise, who challenges the figures that I have just given—37.4 per cent. last year, 37 per cent. this year, 36.8 per cent. next year.

As a result of falling levels of debt and lower long-term interest rates, interest payments this financial year are projected to be almost £4 billion lower than in the previous year. That money, which is now available for front-line services, would not have been available under the previous Government.

Having come this far, we will not relax our grip. We have a long-term commitment to stability, not just a month-to-month commitment. We will not repeat the mistakes of the late 1980s when the then Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, spent the proceeds of growth before he had earned them. In 1988, he gave away massive tax cuts and two years later plunged Britain into the deepest recession of modern times. The public finances nose-dived out of control.

We will not make the same mistake as that Conservative Government. We will take nothing for granted. We will not spend money that we do not have or have not earned. This commitment to fiscal stability and effective public spending for the long term has been doubly strengthened by our reforms to the public spending framework. Our new three-year spending plans, set out in

[Mr. Smith]

the comprehensive spending review, give Departments and our public services the certainty and stability they need in order to plan beyond the one-year time horizon.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order.

Mr. Davey: Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that those three-year spending plans are set in stone?

Mr. Smith: I am grateful for that question from the Liberal Democrat representative. As I was saying, we have firm fiscal rules, we are not relaxing our grip, and the comprehensive spending review targets stand. That is as clear an answer as the hon. Gentleman could wish for. Through those plans, based on a platform of stability in public finances, we have been able to commit significant extra investment to our key public services at the same time as meeting the tough fiscal rules. That has meant an extra £40 billion over three years for education and health—£40 billion that was opposed by the Conservative party, which described our spending plans as mad, reckless and irresponsible.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): The Chief Secretary will recall that the Prime Minister addressed the parliamentary Labour party on 7 May 1997 at Church house, saying that he wanted proposals for reducing the social security bills. In the light of that remark, can the right hon. Gentleman explain why social security spending will increase from £97.3 billion last year to £112.3 billion at the end of this Parliament?

Mr. Smith: I was not aware that the hon. Gentleman had been at Church house—perhaps he was anticipating his former colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward).

Mr. Ruffley: Why has it gone up?

Mr. Smith: Judging from the remarks the hon. Gentleman is making from his sedentary position, I cannot judge how far he subscribes to big tent politics, but I shall give him the benefit of the doubt.

At the general election, we promised to cut the costs of economic and social failure. We are doing so. When in Opposition, we were challenged about what we would cut to reduce the deficit. I recall being challenged on that point by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory). We said that we would cut unemployment in order to bring down the deficit, and that is exactly what the Government have done. Some 700,000 more people are in jobs, long-term youth unemployment is down 60 per cent. and the rest of long-term unemployment is down by more than half. As we get people into work, they benefit, their families benefit and—

Mr. Ruffley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Smith: I have given way already to the hon. Gentleman, and to just about all of his hon. Friends present in the Chamber. I want to make some progress.

The Conservatives opposed our spending £40 billion on health and education. They said that it was madness, that it was reckless and that it was irresponsible. The record also shows their plans to privatise the health service. The Conservative health spokesman—the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)—has said:

"We will have to find other ways of getting the treatment required by perhaps having medical insurance."

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) is on the record as saying:

"The problem with the NHS is that we do not charge for much of what we do."

The Tory health spokesman talked of Trojan horses—*[Interruption.]* These are the words of Conservative spokesmen, and no one on the Tory Benches is rising to challenge them. They are offering a Trojan horse for the privatisation of the NHS.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Smith: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

Under the previous Government, the increase for the final three years was £10.5 billion. *[Interruption.]* By contrast, we are delivering an increase in health funding of £21 billion. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May we please have an end to comments from a sedentary position from both Front Benches and Back Benches?

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In the final three years of the previous Government, growth in education spending was £7 billion. By contrast, we have committed additional education spending of £19 billion. That is what we mean when we say that education is our top priority.

NHS spending rose by an average of just 2.9 per cent. a year during the entire Conservative period in office. The Labour Government will achieve yearly real growth averaging 4.9 per cent. over the comprehensive spending review period. That will help to deliver modernisation of the NHS; the largest hospital building programme in NHS history; fast, modern, convenient services such as NHS Direct—the 24-hour telephone helpline—and NHS Direct online; and improvements to hospitals and general practitioners' premises.

After so many years of neglect, the comprehensive spending review also heralded a doubling of public sector net investment. The rise, by 0.5 per cent. of gross domestic product, in net investment over this Parliament compares with a 1.5 per cent. cut during the final Conservative Parliament. Gross investment will total nearly £30 billion a year by 2001-02, providing new resources for the renewal and modernisation of the UK's infrastructure. On top of that, new money is coming in under the private finance initiative. Since the general election, we have turned the PFI around. We have signed deals worth £5 billion—more in two years than during the whole five years of the last Tory Administration.

The PFI is now working in sectors such as health where it had not worked before. Looking ahead, we expect to sign deals worth more than £11 billion in the next three years in such diverse sectors as schools, hospitals,

local authorities, defence and property management. That represents more than 20 per cent. of total net public sector investment over the period.

That is all a significant increase in resources for our front-line public services, but it is all investment for reform. The Government's public service agreements are at the heart of the new approach. Published a year ago, PSAs are a contract with the people, a promise of lasting improvements in Britain's public services. PSAs establish tough, measurable policy and efficiency targets that Government will deliver in exchange for the extra investment that we make. Our extra investment in schools and hospitals—worth £40 billion—must result in £40 billion worth of improvements.

In the next spending review, to be completed next year, we want to go further in ensuring that policies and services are designed and delivered in a more integrated, flexible and customer-centred way, but for that to happen we need to enhance the Government's capabilities for designing and delivering cross-cutting policies and programmes. Problems such as crime and social exclusion cannot be tackled by Departments acting in isolation. Departments need to work with each other to develop coherent and consistent policy and to ensure that it is delivered coherently and consistently.

We must learn to work with others to build a new culture of partnership. We must reach out to service providers in local government, the voluntary sector and the private sector, and we must consult service users themselves. *[Laughter.]* Conservative Members should not laugh. If they had done a bit more consultation with service users when in government, they would not have left the public services in the mess they were in at the general election.

The cross-cutting reviews that we undertook in the previous comprehensive spending review were successful, bringing forward radical and innovative new approaches—from the national drugs strategy, which is investing an extra £211 million over three years and tackling the causes of drug misuse, to the new sure start programme, which will improve services for young children and families, in which we are investing £450 million over three years.

In next year's spending review, we will build on that success. In consultation with Departments and local government, we have identified 13 cross-cutting reviews to be conducted between now and next summer. The reviews will help us to achieve our goal of reducing child poverty by half by the end of the next decade, on our way to ending child poverty within 20 years.

Already our measures are lifting at least 1.25 million people out of poverty, 800,000 of them children. Not only are we helping children out of poverty at home, but by means of the measures that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced, we are, through debt relief, tackling poverty in the world's poorest countries.

Our cross-cutting reviews will ensure that every child and every family is given the best opportunities to fulfil their potential. A cross-cutting review of welfare to work will consider how we can move towards employment and opportunity for all. In addition to last year's review of services for children, we have reviews looking at young people at risk and at old people. Just as we promote work for those who can, we will improve security for those who cannot.

To last year's reviews of illegal drugs and the criminal justice system, we have added a new review of crime reduction, exploring radical new options for tackling the causes of crime. We are building on the review of local government finance in the last comprehensive spending review, and have added new reviews that look at service delivery in deprived areas and in the countryside.

We have established a review of science and research to consider how public support for them can better address the needs of the economy at large. Two further reviews will look at cross-cutting issues overseas: how Britain can best contribute to conflict prevention, and how it can help to secure nuclear safety in the former Soviet Union.

For nearly all those reviews, we have nominated a lead Minister and established an interdepartmental team. The reviews will draw on relevant expertise from outside, and within, Whitehall. That approach will produce a modern spending review for a modern Government. In the review, we shall continue to match investment with reform—increasing the amount available for the NHS, for education and for other priorities in our public services.

The Labour Government have made the choices necessary to deliver stable and sustainable public finances. We have been steadfast in our priorities, which are the nation's priorities. As a result of prudence and a commitment to investment in return for reform, a total of £40 billion will be invested in the nation's priorities—health and education. We are a Government committed to adopting new and innovative approaches for service delivery. We are committed to prudence and stability in our public finances. We are committed to public services, not only with value for money but with the highest quality of service, truly fit for the 21st century.

As the Government mark the achievements and the promise of our public services, we record our thanks, and those of the House, for the contribution made by public sector workers. Their commitment makes those services possible. We thank the 140,000 doctors, nurses and ambulance staff, the 50,000 firefighters, the 126,000 police officers and all other workers in councils, utilities and the voluntary and private sector who will be working over this Christmas and on millennium eve. We thank them and wish them a happy new year.

1.47 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes that, according to Government figures, the burden of taxation has risen from 35.3 per cent. of GDP (1996/97) to 37.4 per cent. by April 1999; condemns this increase in the burden of taxation since the Government took office and the increase in business regulations which has accompanied it; condemns the Government's failure to achieve the promised improvements in public services while at the same time waste in the public sector has increased; and, while welcoming the Government's health and education spending increases, regrets that these have not been accompanied by the promised reform of social security expenditure which is set to rise by more than £30 billion over the next three years."

This is the first occasion on which I have debated with the present Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith); I congratulate him on his appointment to that important post. He is the fourth Chief Secretary since the general election. I hope that he serves for a slightly longer time than his predecessors—although not for too long. The other Chief Secretaries have come

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and gone in various circumstances. During their terms, they all created considerable confusion in the public finances. Perhaps each of them tried to apply his own accounting principles—albeit with unhappy results for the rest of us. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will try to wipe the slate clean and will at least present what is going on in a reasonably coherent way.

Let us start with some common accord, as this is the last debate that will take place in the House this century—indeed, this millennium. I certainly join the right hon. Gentleman in thanking those public sector and other workers who will keep all the services going over the holiday season.

The Conservatives can take pride in the fact that the century now drawing to its close is definitely the Conservative century—one that has witnessed the triumph of free market economics and policies—

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall give way to the hon. Lady later.

I can assert, without disagreement from either side of the House, that this century has seen the triumph of market economics and of the economic policies advanced by the Conservative party. That has undoubtedly demonstrated the fact—first stated by Adam Smith—that the wealth of any country depends not on its natural resources, its climate or even its political influence in the world, but on the system of voluntary exchange and the market specialisation that flows from that. That system, properly encouraged and regulated, has led to the fantastic increases in the general standard of living, among all our people, that we have witnessed this century.

The same process has also exposed socialism not just as a system that is hopelessly inefficient at generating wealth, but as one that takes away human freedom. It is one of the achievements of this century that it has consigned socialism to the dustbin of history. Now the—*[Interruption.]* If any spokesmen for socialism are lurking on the Labour Benches, we will be very pleased to hear from them at this belated stage.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I was interested in the right hon. Gentleman's reflection on the Conservative contribution to this century. Is he aware that Winston Churchill was in favour of a minimum wage? Is it not the case that, given the chance, the right hon. Gentleman would abolish the national minimum wage and, in doing so, give 2 million people a pay cut?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: None of what the hon. Lady said contradicts the points that I was making. Indeed, she has drawn attention to the fact that the Labour party's contribution to the process has been at best most undistinguished. The Chief Secretary has been in the House for 12 years. Let us not forget that, for the first 10 years, he did his best to hold up the economic reforms that he now regards as essential and to pour sand into the free enterprise machine that he is now proud to inherit.

The hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has not been in the House quite so long. However, I strongly suspect that she also spent the first part of her political career opposing all the necessary reforms that were advanced by the Conservative party and opposed by the Labour party.

Kali Mountford *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I promised that I would give way to the hon. Lady.

Kali Mountford: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does not the poor attendance of Conservative Members reflect their lack of enthusiasm for this subject? Is that perhaps due to the trebling of poverty under the previous Government?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I have all the help from my hon. Friends that I could possibly wish for.

I now come to the first undisputable fact in the debate—again, it was not contradicted by the hon. Member for Don Valley—which is that during our term in office, the Conservative party built up a world-class economy, with falling unemployment, low inflation, falling public debt, high growth and a globally competitive economy. That is the golden economic legacy to which the Chief Secretary referred.

The House should not accept my view alone. The report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development published in December 1996, before we left office, said:

"the prospects for achieving sustained output, growth and low inflation are the best in 30 years."

That was the legacy that we bequeathed to the present Government.

Mr. Andrew Smith: Why does the right hon. Gentleman think he lost the election?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: It was not the policies that lost us the election. If they did, why has the Labour party tried to adopt our policies? If there is so much wrong with the policies—*[Interruption.]* So, we do have some critics of the policies that the Labour party has adopted.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): When the right hon. Gentleman suggests that it was not the previous Government's policies that the electorate rejected, is he not dangerously close to suggesting that the electorate do not know what they are doing?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: As I have just said, if the hon. Lady believes that, she is criticising those on the Government Front Bench who have done their best—although failing in practice, I am afraid—to adopt the economic programme and policies that we bequeathed to them.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall make a little progress before I give way again.

The electorate are discovering that the enterprise machine needs to be maintained by people who understand the enterprise economy, not by those who have adopted it in the past two years as a matter of political

expediency. The enterprise economy that the Government took over is now being eroded. They are committed in principle not only to the euro but to the entire European Union social democratic model of high taxes, high costs, a heavy regulatory burden, and all the damage that will flow from those things.

In economics there is of course a time lag between cause and effect, but already the damage is becoming apparent. The World Economic Forum reported in the summer that this year the United Kingdom has fallen from fourth to eighth place in the global competitiveness league. That is a better indicator of what is really happening in the economy than all the waffle that we heard from the Chief Secretary in his opening speech.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I cannot resist the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Davies: Is it not the case that during the 18 years of Conservative Administration there was a benign global economic environment in which the right hon. Gentleman oversaw two massive recessions, whereas now, at a time when a quarter of the world is in recession and the Conservatives predicted recession here, 750,000 more jobs have been created? How does the right hon. Gentleman explain that?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That is all nonsense. We lived through two global recessions. It is the hon. Gentleman and his party who have had the benign economic world outlook of which to take advantage.

We can all agree that to debate these issues properly we need the facts, and the prime source of facts about the economy must inevitably be the Government. The Chief Secretary referred to a transparent fiscal policy. I have to say that it is so transparent that it has become practically invisible. In the past weeks and months, Ministers have demonstrated a complete inability to recognise even their own facts and figures about the economy. The Chief Secretary was at it again today when he talked about the tax burden.

We know that the additional tax burden on the British people, both announced and implemented, amounts to £40.7 billion over this Parliament. That figure comes from the House of Commons Library, and is based on Government statistics. Doubtless the Government will disown that figure, however, so let me give them another: the OECD reported on 2 November that of 29 countries that it had surveyed, the United Kingdom had the fastest increase in its tax burden this year. The Chief Secretary may disown that figure, too, but he cannot disown the Government's own Budget documents.

I refer the Chief Secretary to page 165 of the "Pre-Budget Report", which states that, when the Government took office, 35.3 per cent. of gross domestic product was taken in tax. On page 150 of the report, it is recorded, on the same basis, that the burden of tax for the year just ended—this is a fact, not an estimate—is 37.4 per cent. of GDP. The House will agree that 37.4 is higher than 35.3, so the burden of tax has increased.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Will the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that in the last year of Conservative Government, debt was £28 billion, which was over 3 per cent. of GDP? His figure is highly artificial.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I have not referred to the reduction in Government debt when we left office: I am talking about the tax burden. It is rather an eloquent commentary on the tax burden that the hon. Gentleman does not refer to it at all: clearly, he implicitly agrees with what I am saying. All I am asking is that the Chief Secretary should recognise the figures in his own document. They are all there in black and white.

The truth is that the tax burden is even higher than the figure that I have given. How do we know that? We know it because the Government have admitted it. In the tables that I have cited, the working families tax credit has been deducted from the tax figure. There is plenty wrong with the working families tax credit. It is wrong, for instance, that those who earn up to £38,000 a year should be able to draw it. Higher-rate taxpayers will, through the churning mechanism, also receive some of the benefit.

We all agree, because the Government have admitted it, that the WFTC is an item of public expenditure. On page 178, the document says:

"income tax credits . . . score as public expenditure under national accounting conventions."

That could hardly be plainer. Indeed, the same point has been made by the Office for National Statistics. If we add in that social security expenditure, the tax burden is even higher.

Mr. Andrew Smith: The right hon. Gentleman said that there was plenty wrong with the working families tax credit. Would he scrap it?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If there is a great deal wrong with it, it follows that we will change and amend it. The right hon. Gentleman overlooks the fact that we already had family credit, under which many of the people concerned received payments. However, we did not try to turn every business, including every small business, into a benefits agency in the process. We have not seen that process yet or the effect that that may have on employment, but there is a great deal wrong with the working families tax credit. We shall return to that subject in due course. It was very interesting that the Chief Secretary did not even attempt to justify his treatment of the WFTC—as well he might not.

Mr. Smith: Does such treatment not follow the precedent set by the right hon. Gentleman's Administration on mortgage interest relief?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If the right hon. Gentleman is seriously advancing the proposition that mortgage interest relief is the same as a social security benefit, he has not learned anything in the few months during which he has been in his job.

I am not advancing some outrageous opinion or a matter of dispute; I am simply quoting the Government on the working families tax credit. It is stated in the document, as plainly as it could be—admittedly in rather small print at the back—that the WFTC is an item of social security expenditure. However, in the Government's tax tables, they have deducted such expenditure. That is what we mean by

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fiddled figures. When that figure is added to give a true tax burden, the increase this year and by the end of this Parliament over and above the figures that the Government inherited is even more dramatic.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): If the right hon. Gentleman does not consider the working families tax credit to be a negative tax, does that mean that, if a Conservative Government were to scrap it, it would not be covered by their tax guarantee, since they would say that it was not a tax?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Our tax guarantee stands unaltered. I emphasise that it is not me who is advancing the proposition that the WFTC is not a tax credit. It is the Government who are stating that it is an item of expenditure. The hon. Gentleman has a dispute with those on his Front Bench, and he might take it up with them during the debate.

So much for tax increases; they are now indisputable. We must next examine, however briefly, what has happened to the money. So far this Parliament we have had the stealth taxes, but what has happened to the increases in public services? I would say that they have been not so much stealthy as invisible. We have witnessed the well-known failure to reform the welfare state, and we all remember that the Prime Minister himself said that the increased expenditure on health and education was to be paid out of reductions in social security expenditure. Despite that promise, the increase in soeial security expenditure will be more than £30 billion by the end of this Parliament. Again, those are the Government's own figures.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Let us consider health expenditure. The Government and the Chief Secretary persist with the lie that any of my right hon. Friends has ever opposed the Government's increased expenditure on health and education. I regret that that has not only been asserted again by the right hon. Gentleman in his speech but has found its way into the motion before the House.

Kali Mountford *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor said in the debate on the pre-Budget report—

Kali Mountford: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory:—at column 893:

"I said that last year"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Kali Mountford.

Kali Mountford: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member of the House to use the word "lie" in debate in that way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It depends entirely on the context in which it is used. I do not think that I have heard anything out of order so far. Mr. Heathcoat-Amory.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not sitting down immediately when you responded to that point of order. I was quoting from my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who said:

"I said that last year and I say it again today. We support increases in health and education spending."

Within a few minutes of my right hon. Friend saying that from the Dispatch Box, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is again absent from the debate, said:

"We have just heard this afternoon from the shadow Chancellor that he opposed putting that £40 billion in"—[*Official Report*, 9 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 893-905.]

Even though the Chancellor had heard it just a few minutes earlier, he could not tell the difference between truth and falsehood, and asserted—quite mistakenly—that we opposed the additional expenditure on health and education.

Mr. Plaskitt: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No, I am not giving way.

What is certain—we can all agree about this—is that the health performance that that increased expenditure is supposed to have enhanced is deteriorating. I cannot be the only Member who is being deluged with complaints from constituents about the national health service.

My health authority in Somerset has just issued an annual report which points out that the number of people waiting, both as in-patients and as day cases, has risen from March 1997, and that

"the number of patients waiting longer than a year for admission has more than doubled over the past 12 months and shows a ten-fold increase since the end of March 1997."

That is a truly shameful record from a party that came into office promising that it would reduce waiting lists and waiting times. The position is the same elsewhere. Somerset is not alone in this. The number of people waiting to get on a waiting list has more than doubled, to 512,000.

What a way to end the millennium—to have built a plastic dome in Greenwich costing three quarters of a billion pounds—

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory:—while more than half a million of our fellow citizens are waiting even to get on a national health service waiting list. That is a staggering commentary on new Labour's priorities.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No.

Then there is the matter of central bureaucracy. If the Government have a defining characteristic, it is their almost obsessive centralisation and control tendency combined with a disreputable lack of accountability and democratic control.

We know all about quangos and the attendant problems of accountability. However, the Government have given us son of quango, called task force. An interesting article appeared in *The Sunday Times* a few weeks ago. It was entitled:

"Unelected, Unaccountable—Labour's Taskforce Kings".

The Sunday Times discovered that there are at least 318 task forces, involving approximately 2,500 people, who are mostly unelected outsiders. They are the favoured ones who have been "invited to the party", as a senior civil servant described it.

I tabled several parliamentary questions to get to the bottom of the matter. I asked the Government for the number of task forces, but they could not tell me—

Mr. Borrow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can enlighten us. I shall give way just once more.

Mr. Borrow: The right hon. Gentleman would not give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) when she challenged him about public expenditure on the dome. Will he acknowledge that there is no public expenditure on the dome and that the money comes from the lottery? Will he correct his inaccuracies?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That is irrelevant. A plastic tent costing £750 million is being erected in Greenwich while 512,000 people are waiting to get on a waiting list. That is a shameful reflection on new Labour's priorities.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is not giving way.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have given way generously; others wish to participate and I hope that the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) will speak in due course. I hope that we shall have a long debate, to which many hon. Members will have the opportunity to contribute.

Nothing justifies the fact that 512,000 people cannot get on a waiting list to see a consultant.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No. I want to speak about another subject—Labour's task forces. The Government do not know their number or the identity of their members. I asked for a list of members of task forces, but the Government could not provide it. They published a White Paper called "Your Right to Know", but they do not even know how many people their task forces comprise. They did, however, provide some examples, which include: a white-headed duck task force; eight regional task forces to support "Waiting List Action"—no one knows what that is because it is yet to issue a report although it was established in November 1997; the NHS efficiency task force, which was set up in June 1997 and has yet to report; and a private finance task force. The latter is interesting because it includes no Ministers, but its project arm is constituted as a private limited company. The Government do not know who sits on the task forces, yet one of them has set up a private limited company. Someone should look into that.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): There have been successful task forces, some of which were set up by the Tory Government in the early 1980s. The right hon. Gentleman was a Member of Parliament when the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) set up several task forces, including one in Liverpool, which was extremely successful, after the riots there. Before he condemns the idea behind task forces, which comprise private and public sector members working on projects in partnership, he should learn a little history.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am sure that there is useful work to be done by task forces, but when we set them up, we knew their number, who served on them and when they reported. Most of those that I mentioned have not reported, so we do not know whether or not they are successful.

It is truly alarming that the Government do not know the cost of the task forces. I tabled an innocent parliamentary question about the cost of setting up and servicing them, and the Government did not know the answer. I asked about the rules that applied to the selection and conduct of the appointees, but there are none. The new Labour state is unaccountable, expanding and expensive.

The cost of administration by Government Departments has increased by £1.1 billion since the general election. That includes the doubling of the cost of special political advisers in the Departments. We conducted a larger exercise to consider waste in the public sector. A preliminary trawl through some Departments has already identified £410 million of waste and extravagance. That includes the passport fiasco in the summer, which cost almost £30 million, including £16,000 to buy umbrellas for the unfortunate members of the public who had to wait in the rain while the Home Office tried to sort out the mess. There has been an overspend of £20 million on the BSE inquiry, which will be 18 months late. That will not help a single farmer.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall not give way again. If I owe any hon. Member an intervention, it is the hon. Member for Slough. If she wants to intervene now, I shall give way.

Fiona Mactaggart: Why should we take any notice of the right hon. Gentleman, whose grasp of history is so vague that he ignores the initial responsibility for the dome, and whose grasp of economics is so peculiar that he suggests a link between spending lottery money on the dome and delays in the NHS? The Government have liberated money from the lottery to improve the

[Fiona Mactaggart]

health service. The right hon. Gentleman's point is as logical as complaining that people are building private houses while the dome is being built.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am not sure whether that was worth waiting for.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall not give way again because I have already dealt with the point.

We found more than £100 million of fraud in the distribution of benefits from local government. Nine separate consultants have been appointed to advise the Government on the privatisation of the London underground. However, because the Government keep changing their mind—or having it changed for them by the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone)—most of the expenditure is wasted. It had already totalled £18.5 million by May this year, and the figure is almost certain to have increased greatly by now.

When the Prime Minister was challenged about expenditure on the euro last week, he refused to give a figure for expenditure on the national handover plan. Later, his spokesman gave a figure to journalists, but it did not include expenditure by Government Departments on the changeover to the euro, which is already happening. The figure is a secret.

Let us consider the fiasco of gold sales. An independent estimate has shown that selling gold in a falling market to buy euros has already cost £26.2 million—a highly conservative estimate.

Mr. Gardiner *rose—*

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: A superficial trawl through some Departments' expenditure reveals a total of £410 million of waste.

Mr. Gardiner *rose—*

Mr. Plaskitt *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall not give way again. The figures that I have just outlined constitute the public expenditure that the Government do not like to discuss. They are mirrored by the expenditure about which the Government like to boast. That leads us back to our old friend, fiddled figures. A good example is the announcement by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 20 September of a £530 aid package to farmers. Some of the more gullible members of the press took that at face value and described it as a £500 million rescue package. The Agriculture Committee has done us all a service by producing a report that has shown that no less than £293 million of that had to be paid anyway under the existing rules. A further £94 million had already been paid; £60 million simply maintained the existing hill livestock compensatory allowance; and another £89 million represented a simple deferral of extra future charges, which left only £1 million of extra money. The Committee, which has a Labour majority, said that that had led to "misunderstanding and disappointment" in the farming community—I am not at all surprised.

The Government are disguising the elements of public expenditure that they do not like and fiddling the figures in their boasts about other items of public expenditure.

Mr. Gardiner: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No, I am about to finish.

Labour's economic policy simply amounts to almost endless repetition and repackaging and the re-announcement of bits of public expenditure. Meanwhile, it is entirely silent about the huge and growing failure to reform the welfare state as promised. All that is paid for by stealth taxes, which are then fiddled to disguise the truth. That is a pretty nasty record about which we shall no doubt hear more from my hon. Friends.

I hope that Labour Members recognise the quotes with which I shall close my remarks, because they come from their new colleague, the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), who had this to say about Labour economic policy:

"This is another chapter in the Great Labour Lie."

Incidentally, he said that last month. He also said:

"The spin doctors are having a field day but the priorities are all wrong . . . Contrast that with the Conservatives' five Common Sense Guarantees, giving parents powers to improve failing schools, guaranteed waiting times for different operations, a reduction in the burden of taxation, work for those who can work and the protection of our currency, the Pound."

He also commented:

"This year was meant to be Labour's 'year of delivery' and yet all we have seen from Blair's Government so far is broken promises and distorted priorities."

That is what a member of the parliamentary Labour party thinks of the Government's economic policy, and I agree with him.

2.23 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) had great fun with the public sector debt, but I should point out that it has certainly reduced a lot, whatever the figures may be—not only that, but we are paying much less interest on even that reduced amount so there is great positive advantage from the work of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

The right hon. Gentleman dealt with health expenditure, which I shall discuss, but I want first to deal with an innovation from the pre-Budget report. In his statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that the £300 million that he would raise from tobacco duties would be passed to the health service, and few could disagree with that approach. He said:

"There is a strong public health case for year-on-year, real terms increases in the price of cigarettes. While we will now make our decisions Budget by Budget, I can announce a new approach: the extra revenues from a 5 per cent. real terms rise in cigarette duties would go straight to additional investment in the national health service, worth £300 million a year—that is £300 million extra for hospitals and health care which could start next April."—[*Official Report*, 9 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 891.]

I have always agreed with the Treasury line on hypothecation: although there are obvious advantages in being able to relate expenditure to revenue—if we want something, we have to be prepared to pay the tax that will provide it—earmarking expenditure means losing the ability to decide priorities; not only that, but the tax collected may not accord with expenditure plans. There is a case, which I have been pursuing for years, for earmarking money that has been raised from taxation for particular purposes, and I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has accepted that in modified form. An exception should be made on hypothecation where demand is high and ever increasing, the willingness to have certain services is strong and accepted by all and costs will increase indefinitely. The national health service—perhaps uniquely, I believe—meets those requirements. As people's wants are satisfied, they turn ever more to their medical care needs; not only that, but those needs and costs are increasing and will inevitably continue to increase.

When choosing his excursion into hypothecation, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was right to select the NHS. To me, such expenditure satisfies those rare conditions that can justify its introduction. One thing is clear about the health service: its cost will rise ever faster than the rate of inflation or even the growth in the economy. In the early post-war years, the NHS was a beacon of hope among the privations of the period and met many of the highest aspirations of the time. In a society that is more affluent than when the NHS was created 50 years ago, more of the basic needs of our people are being met—they have adequate food and heating in their homes and can indulge themselves in ways unimagined in the early post-war years—but much of that private affluence draws attention to the fact that, despite the £20 billion that was given to it by my right hon. Friend, our national health service will continue to be underfunded because of the way in which new treatments are made available.

Increasing demand will make it difficult for future Governments to avoid either ad hoc rationing or its more formal acceptance. A health service that delivers at the point of need will have to embrace newer and increasingly expensive forms of treatment as medical solutions pour out of the world's research laboratories. As a proportion of our gross domestic product, our national health service represented 3 per cent. in 1960, but that figure is rising to about 7 per cent. for next year. The United States spends more than 15 per cent. and France and Germany more than 10 per cent.

Dr. Starkey: I am listening with interest to the point that my right hon. Friend is making about the advantages that science can bring to the health service, but would he not admit that some scientific advances could reduce the cost of treatment in the health service? They would not necessarily always add to it.

Mr. Sheldon: Some treatments could achieve a reduction in cost, but the overwhelming effort goes into research work and that effort will increase indefinitely. I shall come to explain why I think that that will continue ever more.

We have an efficient health service, but it will come under ever-increasing strain if we do not provide further resources, and the demographic effect is only one problem. The population are ageing and, as wants are met, those of health will represent perhaps the major example of increasing expenditure. The consumer society means rather less to older people compared with their increasing concern for their personal well-being, and the time is coming when we shall have to think more of private medicine, which I do not favour, or introduce a special NHS tax.

Anyone who has served in the Treasury has a visceral feeling about hypothecation, and I am sure that it is shared by the Treasury Ministers on the Front Bench. An important weakness of hypothecation is that it does not take account of changing patterns of priorities in expenditure—the road fund licence still casts its shadow 70 years on—but a certain aspect of health is that, whatever efficiencies may be provided that might limit parts of it, demand will increase into the indefinite future.

In an important study of health care, Hoffmeyer and McCarthy have demonstrated the almost exponential growth of health expenditure in every country. It is possible that people will be willing—more willing, at least—to accept a national health service tax when they can see the direct consequences of their expenditure than to accept other taxes, in respect of which their expenditure disappears in the vast generality of public spending. The time has surely come for the introduction of such a tax to be sensibly explored.

An aspect that will need to be examined is the relationship between the tax and, in particular, the present income tax rate. Some recasting will be necessary. Much work will be needed. Although the Treasury normally opposes hypothecation, it should examine the matter along with the Inland Revenue. However, the case for such a tax is greatly helped by the Chancellor's move in that direction.

Nevertheless, there is a danger in the kind of hypothecation that the Chancellor is introducing. In the case of a partial hypothecation, when part of the spending comes from Government grants and part of it comes from ring-fenced revenue, the danger is that the expenditure round may include a reduction to offset part of the increase arising from the hypothecation, and that the public expenditure element raised by the Chancellor in tax may be reduced. That may not be a problem in the short term—my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is committed in this instance—but I am looking to the future. Treasury involvement in future expenditure rounds may not indefinitely retain the attitude that my right hon. Friend has accepted. It is possible that, following any close examination of the case for an hypothecated NHS tax, the real choice will be to go the whole distance to an all-embracing tax.

2.32 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): The fact that the debate focuses on a relatively narrow set of economic policy issues—issues raised by taxation, and associated issues relating to public expenditure—is an important reflection of the way in which economic ideas have changed over the past quarter of a century.

When I entered the House in 1979, every debate on economic policy covered the whole field. We used to discuss, at great length, monetary policy and the correct position for the interest rate. I make no apology for welcoming the fact that that is no longer regarded as a

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mainstream short-term political responsibility. I also welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Chancellor, has set up a commission—I anticipate—to move the Conservative party's position in the direction of an independent statute for the Bank of England. I am glad that that is no longer regarded as the focus for a short-term debate in the House of Commons.

When I first entered the House, we used to engage in endless debates about incomes policy. I am glad that all Members—or, at least, virtually all Labour Members—consider incomes policies to be the responsibility of employers and employees, and not a subject for political debate here. We also used to have endless debates about industrial policy, but I am pleased to say that industrial policy is now considered to be the responsibility of customers and their suppliers, and is not regarded as a focus for political debate in the Chamber.

Nowadays, our economic policy debates are much more narrowly focused. They deal partly with trade and competition policies but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), the shadow Chief Secretary said, a regulatory framework is necessary to the operation of an open-market system, and we take account of that as well. We also now recognise that, although the issues are important to the House, the House is part of an international trading network.

That is one set of issues with which we deal here. However, when it comes to economic policy, there is a supremely important set of issues, which is unambiguously the responsibility of the House of Commons and no one else. I refer to the two critical questions that lie at the heart of fiscal policy. First, how can we, or should we, tax the people who elect us? Secondly, what are the proper priorities for spending the money that they pay as a result of those taxes? Those are, unambiguously and without qualification, issues for debate here in the House of Commons.

I make no secret of my welcome for the more plural world that I have described, in which the majority of key influences on the evolution of the economy are not politicised in the Chamber, but are widely diffused throughout society and removed from short-term party politics. I am glad that, throughout the House, we now recognise the global nature of a sophisticated economy. In particular, I welcome the fact that those developments imply for the British House of Commons, and for British domestic politics, a clearer focus on the central questions of fiscal policy. It is on those questions—first, how much should we tax; secondly, what are our spending priorities in regard to the use of tax revenues—that I want to concentrate.

I think that those questions should be taken in order. The first does not, in fact, relate to how much we would like to spend; it asks what is the right level of taxation. There are a number of reasons why taxation must determine expenditure, rather than the other way round. The Government's plans in regard to the right level of tax are swathed in obscurity. The Chief Secretary waxed lyrical on the importance of transparency. I agree with him about that, and especially about the essential question of the Government's intentions in regard to the tax burden imposed on those who elect us. However, having ploughed through the 160 pages of the pre-Budget report, I found precious little.

I then picked up what I assume to be an appendix to the pre-Budget report, entitled "Analysing UK Fiscal Policy". I thought that that might be a hint that we would be given some signposts somewhere setting out the Government's intentions for tax policy but, as I flicked through the pages, it became increasingly clear that all I would find was algebra.

I think it important for my electors to know that, according to the Government's policy,

"PSNBt = CBt + PSNIt".

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) once memorably observed in deference to the new chief economic adviser of the Treasury, it is all Balls. It is all written out in the document, but the Government give us no clear statement about the tax burden that they intend to impose if they have the opportunity to do so.

As my right hon. Friend the shadow Chief Secretary made clear, what we have is the record of what has happened to the tax burden during the two and a half years during which the Government have been in office. As we are not allowed to look into the crystal ball, we have no option but to look at the record, and the record is clear enough.

Mr. Edward Davey: The right hon. Gentleman considers what should be the right level of taxation. Does he think that his party's guarantee that the tax burden, as a percentage of gross domestic product, should fall year on year ought to continue indefinitely, or does he think that it should stop at some point?

Mr. Dorrell: If the hon. Gentleman allows me, I shall set out what I consider to be the right approach in a moment, after I have dealt with the Government. I have been trying to elucidate their policy, as far as it can be made out. Nothing is stated in their supposedly transparent documents dealing with the future; what there is is a record.

The Chief Secretary sought to mislead the House by referring to his Government's record, but neatly omitting the first year of that record. He can challenge that if he wishes, but it is here in the document prepared by the House of Commons Library. Ministers do not normally challenge what is in Library documents, especially when the table concerned acknowledges as its source Her Majesty's Treasury, *Budget 1999*, HC 298. The figures from Her Majesty's Treasury show that, since the present Government came to power, the burden of taxation has risen from 35.4 per cent. to—at the end of their plans—37.1 per cent. Those are, to within a couple of percentage points, the same as the figures in the amendment.

Therefore, the Government's record, as reported either by the Treasury or by the OECD—my right hon. Friend the shadow Chief Secretary referred to that latter report—shows that, within two and a half years of their taking office, the tax burden on the British economy increased by about two percentage points, not including the cooking of the books in relation to the working families tax credit.

The Government's policy on the tax burden on the British economy, in so far as we are able to divine it—we can do that only from their record—has been to

increase it. However, that policy is fundamentally wrong, for two important reasons, the first of which is a matter of political choice—that those who elect us to the House increasingly believe that they are better able to decide how their own resources should be spent. Not only do they want to have a greater say in, and control over, their own lives, but they have long observed that, when their individual spending decisions are made by them and not made on their behalf by someone else, the results more accurately reflect their own wishes and demonstrate more efficiently used resources.

Therefore, our electorate have a strong preference, based both on instinct and on experience, for the maximum share of the economy to be devoted to private individual choice, thereby allowing suppliers and consumers to balance supply and demand.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dorrell: I shall in a moment.

That is the first reason why the Government's willingness to allow the tax burden to rise is wrong.

Mr. Kidney: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dorrell: I shall in a moment; but, before the hon. Gentleman intervenes, I should like him to hear the full weight of the argument in which he seeks to intervene.

The second key reason why the Government's willingness to allow the tax burden to rise is wrong is that the economy in which Britain lives is quite simply unprecedented: an open free-trading economy in which a rising tax burden simply makes economic activity in Britain increasingly uncompetitive and impairs the wealth-creation process. If our tax burden is higher—as it now is, for the first time in living memory—than that in Germany, that is a serious competitive disadvantage for those who seek to locate economic activity in Britain.

Mr. Davey: Rubbish.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman should argue the point with the OECD—I do not pretend to have read every OECD working paper—and, once he has done so, perhaps he would like to report to the House precisely which bit of the OECD's logic he disagrees with. Until then, if he does not mind, I should prefer to rely on the OECD's stated conclusions.

The OECD said that the United Kingdom's tax burden is higher than Germany's, and, moreover, that our tax burden is rising faster than that of any other OECD member. Such a situation is wrong not only because of political principle—which, I accept, is a matter of personal preference—but because it impairs the competitiveness of the British economy. If our competitiveness is impaired, not only will our capacity to deliver rising individual living standards be undermined, but—this is the critical point—the very thing that the Government say that they want to safeguard will be undermined: the quality of public services—which are paid for by taxes raised from that impaired economic base.

Mr. Kidney: I believe that the OECD figures will be found to be false, but that is not the point of my intervention. The right hon. Gentleman is entitled to his opinion that the great British public want to keep a greater proportion of their income, but my opinion is that the great British public want to pay more for good-quality public services. However, is not the deciding factor between our views the result of the 1997 general election?

Mr. Dorrell: I have rarely heard a more spectacular own goal than that intervention. The hon. Gentleman is certainly entitled to his view—that the British people would vote to pay more taxes if given the choice—but his problem is that the Prime Minister shares my view on what one should say to the electorate. During the previous general election campaign, the Prime Minister went round telling the electorate that they could vote Labour and there would not be a tax increase. Moreover, the Chief Secretary is anxious to show that the Government have not broken precisely that pledge—although the figures that I quoted show that they have broken it in style.

During the general election campaign, the Labour party was so anxious to disagree with the conclusion of the hon. Gentleman and to agree with the one that I hold on voters' preference on taxation that Labour misled the electorate about the implications of electing a Labour Government.

The two reasons that I have given—first, that people want to have lower taxes; secondly, that, in a globalised economy, the competitive interests of the British economy require lower taxes—make it important for our tax policy to be based—this answers the question asked by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey)—precisely on the tax guarantee given in my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition's document, "The Common Sense Revolution". That states not that the tax burden would be lowered annually—that is not what the guarantee says—but that, by the end of the first Parliament of the next Conservative Government, the tax burden will constitute a lower share of national income than it does on the day that that Government are elected.

In a competitive environment, tax competition is not an expression of opinion, but a fact of life—it is not something that the House is able to legislate away. In a globalised economy, we have no choice but to deal with tax competition. Unless we want to turn ourselves into the Albania of the future, we have no choice but to engage in tax competition. We want to trade in the marketplace, where tax rates are a key determinant of the competitiveness of the British economy.

Mr. Davey: My question was: at what stage does the right hon. Gentleman think that, in his world of tax competition, the tax burden as a percentage of gross domestic product will have reached the optimum level? Does the burden have to decline inexorably, to nought, or, at some stage, will the tax burden as a percentage of GDP reach the right level?

Mr. Dorrell: My right hon. Friend the shadow Chief Secretary referred to the fact that the principles of the competitive economy were first elucidated, in the 1770s, by Adam Smith. The competition process has continued in the intervening 230 years, and I do not think that it will halt in the foreseeable future. The hon. Gentleman is asking me to define the end of the process, but the process will never end. The competition process is an inevitable part of a competitive economy. As long as the British economy participates in a global economy, there will be

[Mr. Dorrell]

intense, relentless and unavoidable pressures to reduce the tax burden. I believe that to be true for the foreseeable future.

Mr. Geraint Davies: How seriously can we take Conservative Members' tax guarantee when, the last time that they made a tax guarantee, we ended up with 22 additional Tory taxes? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the former Prime Minister—his former leader—who said that the tax guarantee will necessarily lead to swingeing public expenditure cuts? The right hon. Gentleman's position is impossible.

Mr. Dorrell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking his second question, as it takes me neatly to the second heading in my speech—to state directly the implications of the tax guarantee for public expenditure, and particularly for public services. I attach considerable importance to that subject.

In my time as Health Secretary, I was often told that my attitude to the requirement relentlessly to bear down on the tax burden—my attitude today is the same as it was when I was a Cabinet member—was inconsistent with my commitment to the maintenance and development of the national health service on the basis that health care should be available according to need rather than ability to pay. Over the past weekend, I have been told that again, by the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward). I am sad that he should have quoted that wholly flawed logic—I believe that it is profoundly mistaken—as one of the reasons for letting down his electorate.

The logic is mistaken for two key reasons. First, it is simply innumerate to conclude that it necessarily follows that, because the national health service accounts for 6 per cent. of public expenditure, and public expenditure as a whole accounts for about 35 per cent. of national income, the 6 per cent. must fall if the 35 per cent. falls. If taken together, health and education account for barely a third of all public expenditure. If we mean anything at all when we say that health and education are priorities, surely to goodness we mean that those two spending programmes are more important than many others in the total accounted for by public expenditure, and that we envisage that health and education will take a rising proportion of that share of the economy devoted to public expenditure.

So long as the two numbers concerned are roughly 12 per cent. for health and education and around 35 per cent. in total and, so long as those two totals remain as far apart as they are, it is little better than pusillanimous to say that we are unwilling to face up to the implications of the assertion that health and education are priorities and to make choices elsewhere in the public expenditure programme. It is an old description of the art of politics that to govern is to choose. That is what Governments are there for, in the context of this fiscal policy debate—to make judgments about what they can afford to raise in taxation, given the constraints that I have described, and then to make choices about where priorities lie in the use of that expenditure. It is, I repeat, pusillanimous to say that we cannot deal with our priorities in the context of a declining share of national income taken in tax.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if those priorities are observed and good housekeeping elsewhere in the national budget is undertaken, the total tax revenue might go up in the medium to long term and provide even more resources for health and education?

Mr. Dorrell: I agree with my hon. Friend, who accurately pre-empts my next point. It is not only a matter of arithmetic to say that the proposition that one cannot be in favour of lower taxes and higher health and education expenditure is wrong. There is a more fundamental reason why it is wrong. If the tax burden is allowed to rise to an uncompetitive level, we shall not succeed in safeguarding health and education expenditure either, precisely for the reason that my hon. Friend identifies—that an under-performing economy will not deliver the tax revenues to pay for the health and education spending that I for one want to see.

The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) addressed the question of how we deliver an effective NHS for the future. He advocated the introduction of a form of hypothecated specific tax revenue for the health service. I do not agree with that view. I am strongly of the view that the main burden of the financing of health care in Britain should come from the Consolidated Fund because it reflects one of the highest priorities not just of me as a politician, but of the people who elect me. If one asks them what they think they pay taxes for, there are very few services that score higher on their priority list out of the main Consolidated Fund taxes than the NHS. That is where the main burden of health expenditure ought to lie.

As a former Health Secretary, I would not relish the prospect of trying to manage the health service through the peaks and troughs of the economic cycle on the proposition that health expenditure, for some reason, needs to fall because the tax yield from the hypothecated revenue has fallen because we are going through a short-term recessionary period. The right hon. Gentleman may disagree, but that is the implication of linking health expenditure directly to a hypothecated tax yield—the expenditure on health care would rise and fall according to the yield of the tax. We all know that yields from tax rise and fall according to the stage of the economic cycle.

Mr. Sheldon: We know that those who decide on the spending should decide on the taxing, and that is so throughout all public expenditure. However, there are limited circumstances—I can think of only one, the NHS—where expenditure and taxation can be directly related so that we can see what people are prepared to pay for what they are to receive.

Mr. Dorrell: I am repeating myself, but I think that the problem with that argument is that the proposal links expenditure on health to the yield of a particular tax in a particular point in the cycle, rather than allowing health expenditure to be planned in the medium term out of the Consolidated Fund, which I believe to be a better model.

The central charge against the Government is that they have failed so far, in two and a half years, to deliver the control of public expenditure that is one of their central obligations. Because they have failed to control public expenditure and to make the necessary choices, they have failed to control the tax burden imposed on the British economy. That rising tax burden is undermining the competitiveness of the British economy, which is

undermining precisely the objective that the Government say that they hold dear—the proper financing of public services.

The Government cannot claim that they are ignorant of the dilemma. Before the general election, the Prime Minister said that he would pay for increases in health and education spending through savings on social security spending. Through their failure to deliver on that central pledge, the Government are delivering slower increases, possibly, on health and education than would have been available had they really faced the difficult decisions. More importantly, the tax burden is rising and the Government are undermining competitiveness, and that will jeopardise our capacity to deliver not just rising living standards, but high-quality public services in the future.

2.57 pm

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): As we have heard, through the policies of this Government we have secured £40 billion more for schools and hospitals. That amounts to a significant part of the funds needed to make the necessary investment in the public services that the public need and cherish most. It is £40 billion with room to spare—the room in which the war chest is kept safely locked, and we have the key.

It is investment that the Tories would never have made. They said that it was reckless, irresponsible, the product of Peter Pan economics and the consequences of forecasts that could not be met. We know now that the doomsayers on the Opposition Benches were wrong, and that our forecasts were right. One year on, we enjoy historically low rates of inflation and rates of interest, and more people are in work than ever before.

Since we know that the Conservatives' forecasts were wrong, we know also that had they won the last election, God forbid, the economic policies that they would have followed would have been wrong also—as wrong as the policies that they followed in government. They said then that there was no alternative—at least none that they could think of—to boom and bust, mass unemployment, creeping inflation, 15 per cent. interest rates, two recessions, wrecked businesses, repossessed homes, ruined lives, a huge national debt and underfunded public services.

Mr. St. Aubyn: If the Government's economic policies have been so successful, why has the savings ratio collapsed over the past two years? Can that be a sustainable basis for our economy?

Mr. Stinchcombe: It is interesting that of all the economic failures that I mentioned, the hon. Gentleman did not question one but referred instead to the savings ratio.

Under the past two and a half years of the Labour Government, we have seen that there was a real alternative—one of steady and sustainable economic growth, low inflation, high employment rates and proper investment in our public services. We were told that we had copied the Conservatives' policies, but the Conservatives did not back the new deal, the minimum wage or the independence of the Bank of England. Indeed, they set their face stonily against every one of the prudent policies that have changed their record of economic failure into our record of economic success.

Mr. Geraint Davies: I remind my hon. Friend that a falling savings ratio is associated with growing confidence in a growing economy. Does he agree that that has been observed in economic history and is a signal of the great success that he is so eloquently painting?

Mr. Stinchcombe: My hon. Friend makes his own point.

There is a new avenue in economic policy: not tax cuts and possessive individualism, the way of the old right; not tax and spend, the way of the old left; but sustained investment and sustainable growth in both private and public sector, the way of the new left and the centre left. Through our enterprise we are prosperous and through our investment in public services all of us can better share in that prosperity.

Our future prosperity surely depends on schools. The Tories had 18 years to invest in schools, yet before the general election I was more likely to see buckets than computers in the classrooms that I visited. What a difference we have made in two and a half years—through our investment, in my constituency we now have boilers that work, roofs that do not leak, more books and more information technology.

This year alone, I opened two computer suites in junior schools—Victoria junior and Park junior—and I have seen others in virtually every other school that I have visited. It is not only computers: it is new build, too. During the general election campaign, I was besieged by letters from angry parents of children at Higham Ferrers infants school facing class sizes of 38. This year, I opened the new classroom that brought the class size down to 30. That is not the only classroom that has been funded. Earlier this year, my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards came to Wellingborough to open the extension to Warwick primary school. Not only under-11s but secondary school children, too, will benefit.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Stinchcombe: No. I have a specific point on which I want to close.

Every summer since I was elected, there have been insufficient secondary school places in Wellingborough and the nearby villages.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Stinchcombe: I am making a specific point relating to my constituency. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be very interested to hear what the new right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said about exactly this problem.

Because of the shortage of secondary school places in Wellingborough and the contributor villages, children have had to be bussed to other towns. Last week, I received a ministerial letter stating that approval had been given for the expansion of Wollaston school by one form entry, enabling the need to be met. That is what I and the county council asked for. Real money—£927,000—is being delivered to be invested in real students, bringing a real solution to a real problem.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Stinchcombe: If the hon. Gentleman will sit down, I will bring my remarks to a close.

[Mr. Stinchcombe]

I am sure that that solution will be welcomed by Conservative Members and especially by the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea, who came to my constituency not long ago to talk about the problem of secondary schools there. He showed great concern, for which we were grateful. He went on local radio to talk about the cause of the problem.

I have a tape of what the right hon. Gentleman said. He was asked directly whether the Secretary of State for Education and Employment should have closed a local secondary school and, in the clearest possible terms, he replied:

"It seems absolutely extraordinary that should have been decided . . . The whole thing seems to have been done without any foresight or imagination whatsoever, just to have been incredibly inept, and I think the people responsible for these really, seriously wrong decisions need to stand up and be brought to account."

One cannot be clearer than that. There is no room for doubt: it was the fault of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment who made the decision—the last Tory Secretary of State for Education and Employment, who was in the Cabinet with the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea. What a savage indictment of his own party's performance in power are the phrases "incredibly inept", "absolutely extraordinary" and "seriously wrong decisions" and the reference to the lack of foresight and imagination.

The Tories made the mistakes that caused real pain to my constituents. Through our economic policies, we pick up the pieces, heal that pain and clear up the mess.

3.5 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Like the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), I have constituents with children of secondary school age who have a problem getting a place, but that problem could be solved not by extra spending and building more classrooms but by overturning the Greenwich judgment.

Mr. Ruffley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: No, it is too soon.

If the Government overturned the Greenwich judgment, Kingston borough council could give priority to local residents, over residents of neighbouring boroughs, who want to send their children to local secondary schools. Just like the Conservative Government, they have failed to do that. I wish that they would do it, because that would certainly give good value for money and my constituents could have their secondary school places at no extra cost.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is it official Liberal policy to abolish the Greenwich judgment, so that no pupil in Croydon, for example, would have the right to go to school in another borough; or is that simply the hon. Gentleman's view?

Mr. Davey: It is Liberal policy to overturn the Greenwich judgment, but the hon. Gentleman misrepresents the implications, as it would not prevent children living in Croydon going to school in other boroughs; they simply would not have priority or an equal right to places with those who live in those boroughs. Residents pay council tax to their local education authority and, surely, in a democratic system, they should have priority. I am more than happy to confirm that that is my party's policy.

The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) made an important contribution to the debate on public expenditure. He argued that there was no problem with any Government continually reducing the tax burden and gave two major reasons why that burden as a percentage of gross domestic product must decline year on year: the need for competitiveness for the wider economy and the need to increase personal choice.

Many factors determine an economy's competitiveness, including the ability to have open markets and to trade freely across the world, the education system that underpins people's entrepreneurial and innovative abilities, and the amount of research and development being undertaken. The link between the tax burden as a share of GDP and an economy's competitiveness is very weak. Many other factors are far more important.

I agree that if the tax burden grew exponentially as a proportion of GDP, there would come a point at which the public sector would drive out the private sector and competitiveness would be compromised, but I do not think that we are anywhere near that. We need to get best value for money and resist large increases in the tax burden, but the right hon. Gentleman oversold the case on competitiveness.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman may remember that our rate of profits tax started the 1980s at about 50 per cent. and ended that decade at about 35 per cent., and that pretty well every other major European country cut its rate of profits tax, usually about two years behind us, in line with the precedent established by Nigel Lawson when he was Chancellor. Was that pure coincidence, or did the other countries feel subject to tax competition and need to cut their tax in order to remain competitive?

Mr. Davey: I do not seek to deny the importance of tax competition, but the right hon. Gentleman mentioned a specific tax and how it affected competitiveness and foreign direct investment. One may need to shift the burden of tax—for example, one may need to reduce the tax on our corporate sector and increase it on the causes of pollution—but that is a different issue from the overall tax burden.

Mr. Dorrell: Which specific taxes would be exempt from the general requirement? I would have thought that if one established a general requirement to reduce the burden of tax, it would flow through to specific taxes, but the hon. Gentleman seems to think that some specific taxes should not be subject to such tax competition.

Mr. Davey: It is clear that some taxes have more impact on international trade decisions, and thus competitiveness, than others. Corporate tax is more likely to affect corporations' decisions on where to locate than the level of income tax. It is obvious that different taxes will have different propensities to affect investment decisions. I have read much of the academic literature on the point, and there is no evidence to suggest that taxes on income, property or sales affect international decisions on the location of business.

Mr. Tyrie: Unfortunately, some economic illiteracy is creeping into the debate. An increase in tax anywhere

increases the costs on everybody else and on any other firm operating in the economy. Some firms may supply goods for the domestic market and some may supply them for export, but that is irrelevant to the effect of an increase in tax on the overall competitiveness of a country, because the effect will eventually feed through. That is why the only figure that should be considered in the making of comparisons is the level of the tax burden as a whole.

Mr. Davey: I shall conclude this exchange by reiterating my point that the share of a country's GDP that its tax burden represents is a small indicator of its competitiveness. The level of the tax burden is not an explanation of differences in export performance between countries.

The right hon. Member for Charnwood also made a point about personal choice, and that is one reason why the Liberal Democrats wish to decentralise much economic and tax power. In that way, local communities could have more say, through the democratic process, in how tax is spent. When it comes to collective provision of schools, roads and libraries, local people would have a much better opportunity to exercise their choice if the decisions were made at the grass roots. However, if one takes that approach too far at the national level, taxes would be reduced and, as a corollary, benefits to the poorest would also be reduced. If year on year—or Parliament by Parliament, whichever is Conservative policy this week on the tax guarantee—taxes were reduced, it would inevitably hit the poorest in our society.

Mr. Dorrell: Why?

Mr. Davey: In the right hon. Gentleman's analysis of the share of the national budget taken by different Departments, he failed to tell the House that social security takes by far the largest share. It does so to give some personal choice to those who are less fortunate in our society. If one were to reduce taxes to almost 0 per cent.—the right hon. Gentleman failed to say whether that was his eventual aim when I asked him earlier—the poorest would be hit the hardest. That is the inevitable corollary of the right hon. Gentleman's proposals.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that tax not only constitutes the tax burden but is invested in quality of life issues? For instance, tax may be invested in the transport infrastructure and, therefore, if used wisely, tax could attract inward investment. The point that the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) attempted to make is somewhat naive and simplistic.

Mr. Davey: I agree. Indeed, I welcome this debate because it is important for the House to debate public expenditure more often and in more detail. I refer the House to the speech I made on Second Reading of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, in which I went into some detail on how the House should spend more time debating public expenditure and voting on it. This time last year, a similar debate, which would have focused on the public service agreement document published by the Government last December, was pulled because of the resignation of the present Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). Therefore, this debate is long overdue and I welcome it.

We are in the run-up to the Budget, and to the second comprehensive spending review next summer. This debate will enable the House to give some advice to the Chancellor. I hope that the Chief Secretary will relay to the Chancellor the fact that the Liberal Democrats are delighted that he has taken much of the advice we have given him. For example, he gave independence to the Bank of England, which was in the Liberal Democrat manifesto but not in Labour's, and that was the most significant change in economic policy in this Parliament. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) mentioned the recent innovation of hypothecation of fuel and tobacco duties for extra spending. That is an excellent innovation that we welcome. The final policy that the Chancellor has stolen from the Liberal Democrats is free television licences for over-75s. I just hope that Ministers steal more Liberal Democrat policies, because that would be of great benefit to the country.

Mr. Letwin: I had not realised that we could attribute so many of the Chancellor's mistakes to the Liberal Democrats. Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on the comments of the Economic Secretary when she was specifically asked by one of my hon. Friends about the so-called hypothecation of fuel duties and she said that she would give him "no assurances" one way or the other? Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Government do not appear to have accepted the Liberal Democrats' view on the hypothecation of fuel duties?

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that the Government have not been clear about how they will take the policy forward, but the fact that it was contained in the pre-Budget report is a step in the right direction. I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman feels that giving independence to the Bank of England was a mistake, because I thought that the Conservatives were coming round to that policy.

The good news is that the Chancellor is apparently reconsidering some other Liberal Democrat policies on public expenditure. We have had an inkling that we may see a change in the Government's policy on public expenditure. It may have escaped the notice of some hon. Members, but the Government have paved the way for a major change on spending. The Government told the House that the three-year departmental limits of the comprehensive spending review were set in stone, but they are now less sure. The Chief Secretary seemed to think that the Government had not changed their approach to the CSR, but he should talk to the Chancellor. According to the uncorrected minutes of the Chancellor's evidence to the Select Committee on the Treasury last week, which are now available to all on the internet, the Government have changed their position.

The key question that the Chancellor and I were debating in the Committee involved spending in 2001–02, which will be the third year of the existing CSR, when much of the extra £40 billion that the Government motion mentions will be put in place. It will also be the final year of this Parliament before the general election, and the first year of the new comprehensive spending review. I challenged the Chancellor to say whether the Government would stay within their published expenditure limits in that year. The Iron Chancellor's rather limp reply was that it was the Government's "aim" to meet those limits. He did not say, with his usual robust determination, that the Government would meet the limits.

[Mr. Davey]

The impression is of a Chancellor giving himself room to manoeuvre and an escape clause that did not exist when the comprehensive spending review was announced. At that time, he told us how generous he was being and how he would not need to go beyond the spending limits. The Chancellor's reply to the Select Committee was therefore a real shift in position.

I pressed the Chancellor in the Select Committee to say whether he would stick to his comprehensive spending review plans come hell or high water. He could reply only that there was now a "presumption" of doing that, and he went on to say that he wanted to do more for health and education; so we have a Chancellor who is only presuming that he will hit his targets.

Liberal Democrat Members welcome that change and the evident weakening of the Government's position on spending, even though today's motion does not refer to it. The Government have room for an injection of money into our public services, but three matters must be considered. First, will there be a macro-economic effect? Will increased expenditure have a knock-on effect on interest rates? Clearly, no one would want the Bank of England to have to take up the slack and increase rates.

Secondly, what is the fiscal position? Can decisions on tax and spending be afforded? Are the public finances strong enough to take any extra expenditure? Thirdly, what are the politics of the situation? Does the Chancellor want to produce a rabbit out of a hat to please the voters, or does he want to do something to shoot Tory foxes and tease the no-hopers on the Conservative Benches?

Mr. Geraint Davies: Now that it has been disclosed that Neil Hamilton has lost his case, how much more money would the Liberal Democrats lift out of a brown paper envelope to spend in addition to what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has promised?

Mr. Davey: I am delighted to tell the hon. Gentleman that we shall publish our alternative budget just before the Chancellor publishes the real Budget, as we have for the past decade. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) and I are already working on it, so we will be able to give a very detailed reply to that question in a few months. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me until then. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) should not talk across the Chamber. Also, the question of Mr. Hamilton has nothing to do with the proceedings today.

Mr. Davey: I return to the three constraints that I listed earlier. The first is very important, although to my knowledge it has not been debated in the House in recent times. The question is whether the Chancellor's loosening of the fiscal stance would cause a knock-on effect on inflation. The answer to that question depends on how one sees growth and inflation over the next few years.

One may anticipate that growth will slow down, as the Chancellor does in his pre-Budget report, and that inflation will stay fairly low. Just yesterday, a member of the monetary policy group said that it was possible that the target may be undershot. If one therefore believes that the outlook is benign, there would be no problem about loosening fiscal policy quite significantly, as the Bank of England would not be forced to take up the slack.

However, I believe that the outlook is not so benign, and that there is real concern about what will happen. I think that the Government have underestimated growth and that the economy is ticking along quite well. The world economy is picking up, the housing market here is very strong and there is strong growth in real incomes—all factors suggesting that the Government's growth forecasts are underestimates. The almost certain corollary is that inflation has also been underestimated.

Mr. Tyrie: That sounds like a boom.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) mentions the word "boom", and I am glad that he did. I agree that the danger is that we could return to boom and bust. That would be a real mistake, as there was far too much of that when we had a Conservative Government.

It is very important that we do not let a boom occur, so we need some discipline about the extent of any fiscal loosening that might take place. There is some room to loosen the fiscal restraints but, although we do not have a runaway economy at present, there is clearly insufficient room for a massive tax-and-spend giveaway.

The second constraint on the Chancellor is the state of the public purse. How big is Gordon's war chest? That is the question. Gordon claims that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I have spoken to the hon. Gentleman on previous occasions about this matter, but he should know the rules of the House. He should refer to the right hon. Gentleman either as the Chancellor of the Exchequer or as the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for that instruction, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In the pre-Budget report, the Chancellor seemed to think that his war chest was rather healthy, as he predicted a cumulative surplus of £67 billion over the next five years. Earlier, we heard allegations about fiddled figures, and closer inspection of the details shows that the war chest is in fact much larger than that. Adding in reserves and the margins in the departmental expenditure limits gives a cumulative surplus over the next five years of £102 billion.

That is the strength of the fiscal position, even before account is taken of the need for a higher growth forecast, given the likelihood of higher growth. Clearly, the public finances would be even stronger if growth turned out higher than forecast. There is no doubt that the Government could afford to loosen fiscal policy to some extent, but how would that be done? Should the extra money be spent on tax cuts, or on public expenditure increases?

The third constraint on policy is politics. All Chancellors are naturally concerned about the politics of the decisions that they take, so how might politics affect this Chancellor's thinking? On the face of it, this constraint is also rather weak. The Government have a huge majority and a huge lead in the opinion polls.

The Tory party is falling apart, so perhaps the last thing that the Chancellor needs to do is worry about the political implications of his decisions. The Chancellor has at least some cash to spare and is free to decide whether his priority should be tax cuts or extra funding for schools, hospitals and the police.

The Chancellor has met Labour's headline manifesto promises on tax, so he could decide to deliver on the public service investment that is needed so desperately. However, I fear that he will not do so. The Chancellor was very uncomfortable when questioned on the tax burden by the Select Committee. It would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that Conservative Members laid any punches on him, but there is no doubt that the Chancellor is hyper-sensitive. He is paranoid about attacks on his policies and is obsessed with disproving all counter-arguments. It is therefore extremely likely that he will succumb to political temptation and cut taxes before the next election, so shooting the last remaining Tory fox.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The hon. Gentleman has made it clear that he believes that there is an optimum level for the tax burden. He harried my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) for not saying what he thought that level should be, but the hon. Gentleman must know his own preference. Will he say what, according to Liberal Democrat policy, is the optimum level of the tax burden?

Mr. Davey: I certainly do not think that it is 0 per cent., which is the figure to which the logic of the Conservative party and its tax guarantee would lead. The right hon. Member for Charnwood failed to answer my question on that point, but we at least have been clear about our tax policies. Unlike the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrat party publishes alternative budgets and has a very good record about being up front about its policies.

It is possible that, between now and the next general election, the Chancellor will announce a cut in the standard rate of income tax to 20p and a widening of the 10p band. He might introduce such tax cuts just to shoot the Tory fox. That would be a real mistake. Perhaps it illustrates the significance of the defection from Conservative to Labour of the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) who was, after all, famed for his tax bombshell campaign in 1992. The Chancellor, not content with stealing the Tories' clothes on tax, wants to pinch their tailor too. The Liberal Democrats have their own tailor, in the shape of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell and had no need of the hon. Member for Witney.

We believe that it would be wrong for the Chancellor to respond to Tory attacks by slashing income tax rates. It is not the country's priority.

Mr. Kidney: It is very decent of the hon. Gentleman to give way. I suggest that there is another restraint besides political judgment—that is, the response of the independent Bank of England and the Monetary Policy Committee to any tax cut or increase in public spending.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. That is why I talked about the constraint of macro-economic stability in my opening remarks.

There are no real constraints on a targeted, modest increase in public expenditure. There is no doubt that our schools and hospitals need it; our police services certainly need it. Macro-economic stability would not be prejudiced so long as the spending increases were not accompanied by large tax cuts. Public finances are healthy, so the Chancellor can afford to make that extra investment. With the Tories imploding, there is no political need to shoot the tax fox.

The Liberal Democrats hope that the Chancellor has the courage of his deeply held convictions and does not simply thank those working in the public sector, as the last line of the motion says, but gives them his full support by investing in them.

3.32 pm

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Listening to all the theories being bandied about in the debate, I am beginning to get an inkling that the Tories have forgotten everything that they did prior to May 1997. Their record was woeful.

At the start of 1997, there was a huge debate and campaign about the future of the hospitals in my area. The *Grimsby Evening Telegraph* said on 26 April 1997—the Tories had brilliant timing—that Grimsby hospital could be downgraded to a cottage hospital. That was what we were facing—devastation of local health services. Those plans were shelved and considerable extra investment has been made in that hospital. In May 1998, it was announced, thanks to the Labour Government, that Grimsby hospital was to have a brand new state-of-the-art maternity and children's unit. That investment came to £8.5 million.

This is the crux of the debate; never mind the theories about taxation and public expenditure, it is what is done with the money that counts. As I said before, the Tories' record on public expenditure was woeful.

The Tories claim that waiting lists are soaring, yet at my hospitals waiting lists are coming down, thanks to extra investment. They are ahead of target in reducing waiting lists. As the hospitals have confirmed to me, neither is there a problem with out-patient waiting lists. They too are coming down. In addition, NHS Direct was recently launched in our area, and it has been a considerable success. If we compare what was happening in the early part of 1997 with what is happening now, there is a big difference in the provision of health care.

People should be warned about Tory public spending plans. The spectre hovers over us again of hospital closures and of people being forced to go private for all but the most essential health care. If the Tories ever came to power again, what would they get rid of in public expenditure? Would they save £8.5 million by scrapping the new maternity unit in my area? Would they scrap the new renal unit as well? Would they scrap the extra investment in breast cancer care? The Tories must face up to those issues in any debate on public expenditure.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Would the hon. Lady join my campaign for more equitable health service funding in areas such as west Surrey, whose health service provision is being cut to finance some of the improvements in her area? Does she regard that as fair and equitable for the poor and the sick of West Surrey?

Shona McIsaac: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is just not a very good campaigner. On the south bank of the Humber, local Members of Parliament have secured considerable extra funding for their hospitals. We are

[Shona McIsaac]

excellent campaigners and have good relations with our Health Ministers. Perhaps if the hon. Gentleman were a little less hostile, he might get further in his campaign.

My predecessor in the constituency managed to insert in the Police Act 1997 a provision to change the name of the local police force. That simple name change was estimated to cost £1 million—a sum that would have been far better spent on proper policing and catching criminals in the area. In June 1997, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) wrote to me saying that he was not minded to implement that part of the Police Act. No doubt if the Conservatives had won the general election, they would have gone ahead with such a change, which would have cost my police force dear. That again shows the difference between what was happening then and what is happening now.

The Government's spending plans have also benefited pensioners, and we accept that more will be done in the future. Some 16,000 pensioners in my constituency benefit from free eye tests and the winter fuel allowance. Some 3,000 of the poorest pensioners are now better off with the minimum income guarantee, and 6,000 pensioners will benefit from entitlement to free television licences.

It is all about people, and the difference that we can make to their lives by putting a few extra pounds in their pockets. At this time of year, when most people's concept of public expenditure is buying Christmas presents, I think that my constituents are probably happy to have a few extra pounds in their pockets. I have received a number of letters from pensioners saying so. Mr. Leeman of Cleethorpes says that it is good news about the winter allowance going up and about the free television licence for those over 75. Mr. Leeman says that he has also noted the free eye tests and the reduction in VAT on gas and electricity. That was one of the most hated taxes introduced by the previous Government, and it penalised pensioners in particular. We should not hesitate to remind people that the Tories introduced that tax and were happy to see it rise to the top level. We have reduced it, and that benefits people on low incomes in particular.

Opposition parties are always coy about admitting that we have increased child benefit. It helps more than 13,000 families in my constituency. If we are doing that in Cleethorpes, we are helping many more families in every constituency around the country. The Tories never mention that. They have said that they are minded to target child benefit at the under-fives. We should not hesitate to remind pensioners of what the Tories are up to, and we should remind every family that voting Conservative in future would risk the loss of child benefit.

Another measure that benefits families is the working families tax credit. Yet again, the Tories are not happy about it. In most constituencies several thousand families will be, on average, £1,000 or more better off every year. We should warn the people—give them a Tory warning, as it were—that they will risk losing that money if they dare ever to support the public spending plans proposed by the Opposition.

We have been particularly strong on education. My maiden speech was about education and class sizes. Schools in my constituency had classes of more than 40 pupils because of the lack of funding the Conservatives gave to the former Humberside county council. Since then, class sizes have come down. North Lincolnshire—one of the authorities that serves Cleethorpes—has reduced class sizes a year ahead of target. We are right to use the motion to praise those in the public services who have worked hard to help the Government to achieve our targets.

The Conservatives have made somewhat barmy pledges. Will they tell my constituents what they would cut in order to meet their education pledges? Will they take back the extra books that we have given? Will they rip out the extra computer equipment? Will they knock down some of the extra buildings? Parents should be told exactly what the Tories would scrap. Tory education spending plans are not sustainable. Teachers' representatives in my area have called them a recipe for chaos. We should warn the people what support for the Tories would really mean for education funding.

We have heard today about the tax burden. Part of it was the windfall levy on privatised utilities. That money is funding the new deal, which has a real impact on people's lives. Unemployment statistics for Cleethorpes are dramatic. The new deal for the under-25s has brought a 73 per cent. reduction in unemployment for that age group. The number of long-term unemployed is down 67 per cent. The overall unemployment rate is down 27 per cent. What is done with the money is what counts. The Tories did not support the new deal, and they have consistently said that they would scrap it. What would that mean for all the people who now have a future? Would the Tories consign them to the scrap heap? The people should be told.

Anyone who dares support the Conservatives in future will run the risk of devastating our health service, reducing funding to our schools, losing jobs and returning to boom-and-bust economics. Pensioners would lose out. The Tories are, simply, fiscally irresponsible.

3.45 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I should like to pick up on a few points made earlier in the debate. I was astonished to hear from the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies)—no longer in his place—that the lower the savings ratio is, the better for all of us. The hon. Gentleman suggested that it is a sign that things are going well. Of course, the savings ratio in the United States of America is negative while in Japan it is hugely positive, which must be the evidence to which the hon. Gentleman was alluding. He should realise, however, that saving is a counterpart to investment, and that high-quality investment delivers growth. He should reconsider the relationship between savings and high-quality economic performance before he repeats that remark.

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that saving is important for investment, but the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) was trying to make the point that the savings ratio is determined by many things, not just tax policies. When net household wealth is increasing substantially, as it is in the UK with increasing house prices, it is not surprising that the savings ratio is going down.

Mr. Tyrie: We have been unable to elicit any answer from the Liberal Democrats on what tax burden they would wish to impose. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will be able to tell us what he thinks the savings ratio should be if we are to have a prosperous economy.

I shall speak briefly about debt and public spending, then about economic management over the past couple of years. On debt, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon)—a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee who is also no longer in his place—alluded to what he called the Government's excellent performance in reducing the debt burden and the deficit. He failed completely to grasp the fact that those issues can be considered intelligently only in the context of the business cycle. It is easy to reduce debt and the deficit during an upswing. It is difficult—indeed, usually impossible—to do so during a downswing.

The Conservative record on debt and the deficit—particularly debt—was without doubt the best achieved by any Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development country over the lifetime of the last Conservative Government. I have the figures, should anyone wish to challenge them. Every other major country increased its debt stock during that period; the United Kingdom enjoyed a net fall. That was an astonishing achievement. The sharp rise to which Labour always alludes was a consequence of the recession in the early 1990s, by which the UK was particularly badly affected.

Dr. Palmer: Is the hon. Gentleman not missing the point? It is certainly much more difficult to reduce debt when one is plunging a country into recession, but the drawback of the previous Government's record was their propensity to plunge the country into recession. An attractive feature of the past couple of years has been that when a recession was widely predicted by the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleagues, it did not happen, and we were able to reduce debt all the same.

Mr. Tyrie: The economy was more volatile in the 1980s and 1990s and the peaks and troughs were larger. Let me offer the hon. Gentleman one core fact that demonstrates the transformation in the performance of the British economy, on the trend growth line that we want to improve above all others. During the 1960s and 1970s, the British economy grew at about two thirds the average annual rate of the economies of our major European competitors. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, the British economy has grown slightly faster than those of our major European competitors. We have seen greater volatility, deeper recessions and higher peaks, but that has delivered higher overall growth rates.

Certain fundamental things have happened. One was the deregulation of the financial markets, which unleashed a reallocation of capital in this country and achieved much greater efficiency in the use of capital. That contributed enormously to economic growth. However, that same deregulation made the conduct of monetary policy difficult in the mid-1980s. Mistakes were undoubtedly made; those who participated in policy at the time freely admit it. It contributed to a subsequent deeper recession than we would otherwise have had, but the long-term benefits of the deregulation are there for all to see. We are benefiting from it today.

The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), who is also not in the Chamber—he is probably having a cup of tea, too—talked extensively about the £40 billion extra spending that Labour was providing, and what a good thing that was. I certainly support increases in health spending, for example, where it is affordable in the long run; but just as important as increases in spending are increases in performance that arise from the way in which that spending is used. There is no earthly point in putting a lot more money into one particular sector unless it can increase output and delivery as a consequence.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government have, if nothing else, set close performance targets throughout the public services, and that his party has been at the forefront of criticising the Government for interfering by doing just that: setting clear targets on how money should be spent and on performance improvements that the public expect?

Mr. Tyrie: Merely setting a performance target does not take one far. To achieve higher productivity in the public sector, we need to create a system of incentives that is as near as possible akin to that in the private sector, where, as we all know, capital is generally better allocated. That is partly what Labour has moved away from.

On the health service, for example, the figures are indisputable. Again, I have them with me if hon. Members want to challenge me. Output measures in the health service show clearly that the introduction of the internal market increased productivity in the service. Preliminary evidence appears to suggest that changes to the internal market since 1997 have led to some diminution in the trend improvement in productivity.

That is an example of how a change in the structure of policy can reduce the effectiveness of spending. I am as concerned to see increases in outputs in the health service as a result of improvements in the management of the system as I am to see more money put in.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: I will not give way again on that point.

It is a fact that the health service is a huge success story. It is a remarkable institution. In terms of output measures—that is, morbidity and mortality rates—it delivers health care that is comparable with that of all our major competitors, but it does it at about two thirds the average cost per capita. That is a remarkable achievement.

Let us compare the position here with that in the United States, for example. Spending there is about three times more in absolute terms per capita, but morbidity and mortality rates here are broadly comparable, so we see that the health service is a remarkable success. We have to examine carefully why that is and ensure that reforms and extra money in the health service enable what we have achieved to be maintained.

What concerns me is that there is a real risk that structural changes in the health service—for example, the decision to end fundholding—may reduce allocation efficiency and that we may find that we no longer achieve such good value for money for every pound spent.

Shona McIsaac: The hon. Gentleman mentions the United States of America. Of course, in the United States, most people pay thousands of dollars a year for private health insurance and purely publicly funded hospitals are in the minority. Is he saying that that is the model that the Tories will use for their health policy? After all, his party's health policies show that it wants to move

[Shona McIsaac]

more towards privately funded health care. Is he suggesting that we will have a model such as the one in the United States?

Mr. Tyrie: Oh dear, oh dear. I thought that I had made things reasonably clear, but I will have another brief go. I am saying that the health service, for a variety of reasons that I will not bore the House with now, has been an extraordinary success. It has been one of the few examples of an extraordinary public sector institution doing very well and continuing to do well, while almost all other public sector institutions, or a very high proportion of them, started to do badly some time after they were set up, during or just after the war.

My remark about the United States pointed in exactly the opposite direction. I said that we should be wary of implanting the American structure of health delivery. We may have something to learn from the Americans in some areas, but they have a lot to learn from us.

Education is an example of a sector where we spend about the same as comparable countries—for example, France—but have far worse outputs. For example, levels in maths and science at the age of 13, which are measured in all OECD countries, are far worse in the UK. In fact, we are near the bottom of the performance league in maths and science at age 13, even though we spend about the same as comparable countries that do much better, such as France.

I thought that it might interest the House to know that the countries that have the highest performance in maths and science at the age of 13 spend the least. Hungary comes top; Japan does very well. The country that spends the most on secondary education comes almost bottom in the OECD maths and science league: the United States of America. That is an important point to bear in mind when considering education funding and productivity.

The Government have said how marvellous it is that so much more money is being poured into health and education. The point that I am trying to make is that that is only half the story; indeed, it is not even half the story. It is how that money is used and to what effect that count.

Shona McIsaac: What about literacy and numeracy hours?

Mr. Tyrie: Those are forms of regulation and direction from the centre which I am not convinced will do the job. We have to look carefully at the structure of education, perhaps even before we look at further funding. As I said, countries that spend less seem to do better and countries that spend more seem to do worse—and by a huge margin.

For those who doubt that, I strongly recommend, if they can beat it, that they look at the OECD publication "Education at a Glance". I am afraid that they cannot really take it in at a glance: it is several hundred pages of dense statistics with some explanatory tables, but I am sure that it will go down very well when the family is becoming a little stressed over Christmas. Reading "Education at a Glance" will do everyone the world of good.

I shall make some general points on economic management. Labour Members probably will not want to hear the fact that the Government were elected partly because they promised not to change our policies. Labour promised to stick with our policies; they made firm commitments not to increase taxation and said that they would implement Conservative spending policies—not merely on aggregate but Department by Department. They stuck to the spending promise, more or less, but they broke the tax promise—the subject of several recent exchanges in the House. On monetary policy, they decided to become more Catholic than the Pope by making the Bank of England independent and handing it the policy.

During the past year and a bit, there has been some slippage from what the public thought would occur. They thought that there would be continuity of the policies that had brought success. I referred earlier to the statistics on long-run economic success that started in the 1980s and 1990s after 20 years of decline. Those statistics had got through to the British electorate. They were aware that the economy was no longer a basket case and that they no longer lived in a banana republic in the making, but in a reasonably prosperous country—one that is comparable to most of the top European countries.

The electorate were prepared to vote for a change of Government only if they were sure—

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Because the Conservatives were awful.

Mr. Tyrie: It might be true that the Conservatives gave the electorate the odd reason for not voting for them. However, voters were prepared to take that risk only once they were sure that there would be continuity of economic policy. The clearest example of that was in 1992 when the economy was in something of a mess. The electorate overwhelmingly rejected Labour, because Labour had not yet learned its free enterprise lines.

The Government have slipped away from the policies that they were elected to implement. There have been sharp spending increases, but insufficient clarity as to how they will be paid for. There have been sharp increases in taxation. A nonsense rhetoric of boom and bust has developed. When it began, I assumed that it was an election slogan or mantra, but I have become rather worried that some Treasury Ministers—from whom I exclude the Financial Secretary to the Treasury—have come to believe it. If they really believe all that stuff about putting an end to boom and bust, that would be most worrying, because, as we are all aware, the business cycle has been with us for hundreds of years—certainly since writing on economics began. At present, we are probably experiencing an upswing, but there will be a downswing. I do not know when it will occur—if Wall street crashes, it may come next week, or it could come in a few years. However, there will be a downswing; I am absolutely sure of that.

I am also worried that, although Labour have learned the language of the supply side, they have not implemented it—they have learned the lines, but their policies show that they are not convinced of them.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point as to whether Treasury Ministers—I second his exemption—are beginning to believe that rhetoric. In that

context, was it not pretty odd that we received no sensible answer to my questions to the Chief Secretary about what the economic cycle is, where we are in it and when the current cycle will end?

Mr. Tyrie: I agree with my hon. Friend. I gave a tentative answer to those questions. I have been putting those questions to Treasury Ministers for more than two years, but I have still not received an answer. Chief Secretaries come and go; one or two of them made a stab at an answer—perhaps the fact that they did so was one of the reasons the Whips decided to move them on. The point is basic and obvious; eventually the Government will have to acknowledge it. I cannot imagine why they are digging themselves so deeply into this hole.

I pointed out that Labour had learned their supply side lines, but had not implemented a policy. I shall not go over all the points at which regulation on business will undoubtedly reduce economic performance—for example, the social chapter, the minimum wage, the working time directive, the increases in business taxation and much else besides. I am concerned because I have the sense that growth is being taken for granted; there is a failure to grasp the importance of keeping a close eye on what creates economic prosperity. That is redolent of the 1960s. The great mistake of social democrats in the 1960s was to take growth for granted and to assume that the most important issue was how it could be distributed. Indeed, it was argued that redistribution would generate further growth through infinite supplies of extra funding to education.

Mr. Letwin: The Swedish model.

Mr. Tyrie: Indeed. Even if we doubled education spending, I am not convinced that there would be a sharp improvement in education performance.

I have noted my concerns on tax, spending and the supply side. I am also worried about accountability on the economic numbers. There has been a fundamental change to accounting principles. There has been an increase in off-balance sheet finance. There has been a huge number of changes of definition. I shall not bore the House by listing them all, but it is well worth reading some of the information produced by the Library. Those of us who had at least a vague understanding of these matters now find them extraordinarily difficult to grasp. We have such concepts as "annually managed expenditure", "departmental expenditure limits", "public sector current balance net investment", "general government net borrowing", "public sector net borrowing", the "net cash requirement" and the "total managed expenditure—TME". There are a range of such phrases; it requires considerable thought to work out exactly what they mean.

In the past, the Treasury's flagship publication—the Red Book—had chapters with clear headings, such as "Income Tax", "Business Tax Measures", or "Excise Duties". People had a vague idea of their meaning. However, if we want to find those topics in the current Red Book, we have to look under headings such as "Raising Productivity", "Increasing Employment Opportunity", "Building a Fairer Society", or "Environmental Measures". Anyone who wants to work out what is being done and has an understanding of previous Red Books would find it extraordinarily difficult to read the current one.

Mr. Ruffley: Does my hon. Friend deprecate the way in which new Labour, Millbank jargon and rubbish have been introduced to what should be a serious, technical Treasury publication?

Mr. Tyrie: I agree that the Red Book should be a serious Treasury publication. I am sure that many people understand these matters better than I do, but as I helped a little to draft previous Red Books in the 1980s, I have an idea of what they used to contain. We used to listen carefully to the comments of the Select Committee on the Treasury as to how the Red Book could be improved each year. The current Red Book is not a satisfactory document to have been produced by any Government as an explanation for their Budget proposals. I hope that the Government will not repeat this presentation-oriented effort, but will try to stabilise their definitions so that we can monitor the economy more carefully.

I have referred to my anxiety about various matters, such as the rhetoric about ending boom and bust, the meddling with the accounts—partly for presentation and partly from the desire to try something new—and the introduction of meaningless economic rules, such as the golden rule. I have met no one who believes that the golden rule has the slightest economic merit. Apart from members of the Labour party, no one believes in it. The German Government used to have a golden rule, but in effect they have scrubbed it. The Bundesbank has rubbished it—no one believes that it has any real meaning or effectiveness. I worry that all the measures and the rhetoric that the Government have put out are becoming a substitute for thinking through the key issues that economic managers should address in the 21st century.

I do not expect that the Minister will have all the answers, but I wish to raise a few matters that he might like to think about. For example, do the Government accept that the process of globalisation, particularly in capital markets, is likely to lead to a greater amplitude in the business cycle rather than to the end of boom and bust? There is a strong argument to suggest that greater liberalisation of capital markets and the introduction of many new financial instruments will have that effect.

On the Bank of England's independence, much more thought must be given to the increase in weight and importance of fiscal policy that the granting of independence on monetary policy triggers. Again, much greater clarity on the meaning of the published numbers is required if we are to build market confidence.

Mr. Kidney: While the hon. Gentleman is on the subject of the Bank of England, will he give his view on whether it should remain independent in the future?

Mr. Tyrie: Since the mid-1980s, I have held the view that Bank of England independence has many advantages. I held that view when I was in the Treasury and I made my view known publicly as soon as I left the Treasury. I also made my views known when I spoke in the House on the debates on the Bank of England Act 1998. However, I do not think that the way the Bank of England has been made independent is adequate. Further reforms

[Mr. Tyrie]

are clearly needed. The length of appointment of members of the Monetary Policy Committee is ridiculously short, at three years. Several other changes are also required before the bank's reform is adequate.

The Bank of England's independence has not been tested. It will be tested only when we have a recession or the next downturn, which according to Ministers will never come. When the next downturn comes and interest rates are jacked up dramatically, that is when we shall find out whether the bank's independence is what it is cracked up to be.

I have a few more questions for the Minister. I should be interested to know whether the Government are giving any thought to the fact that borrowing is not now taking place in the spot market or the short-term interest rate market, but is increasingly taking place further down the yield curve with fixed-rate mortgages and much fixed-rate and foreign currency lending by businesses. Have the Government given much thought to whether interest rates can continue to do the job that has traditionally been accorded to them in the conduct of monetary policy and the control of inflation, in an era, to which we might be moving, when people do not think about the price of money today but about its price right across the yield curve? People with fixed-rate mortgages do not think about the matter in such terms, but they are increasingly prepared to take the risk of borrowing money at a certain rate for five or even 10 years.

Will the Government also give thought to whether their inflation target for the Bank of England is the right one? I do not mean that in terms of whether the target should be 2, 2.5 or 3 per cent. I agree that the Government were right to go for a symmetrical target and that the European central bank was mistaken in not doing that. Do the Government have a view, however, of whether asset price inflation should be taken into account in the setting of monetary policy? If they do, to what extent do they think that their view should be communicated to the Bank of England, and how do they propose to communicate it?

By asset price inflation, I mean not only house price inflation, but asset price inflation more widely, including the stock market. There is a touch of asymmetry in that regard. Whenever there is asset price inflation, central bankers talk about irrational exuberance and of how things are going a bit over the top. That is what Alan Greenspan said about Wall street some time ago, when it was at only two thirds its current value. However, central bankers do not say the opposite when asset prices are falling. They do not say that equities are absurdly cheap and that we should buy them now. There will need to be a rethink in the 21st century about how the monetary policy target should be defined.

Have the Government given any thought to the effect that new technology and the internet could have on the clearing bank system? If, as Mervyn King suggested in a recent speech, people will no longer need to use a clearing bank to achieve settlement, we could lose control over monetary policy because we would lose a crucial lever. I do not think that the Government have given any thought to that; I have not seen anything on it in the public domain. We may have created an independent central bank at just the time when central banks are becoming rather less relevant.

I wish to discuss one other subject and then I promise to sit down. Public spending control is another issue that the Government have not thought through very carefully. Globalisation will almost certainly increase income dispersal. The most successful in an economy will get even better rewarded and some at the bottom may lose out as the result of global competition. I have not heard the Government say anything on that subject, but I would be interested to know whether they have thought through the effect that globalisation will have on pensions policy and the long-term social security burden.

What is the right response to my questions? I shall not try to provide the answer to any of those major policy issues, except to say that there is a need for a more transparent economic policy than we have now. The description of fiscal policy that is given in the accounts is not adequate any more. It was difficult to understand before, but it is now frankly impossible to comprehend. I strongly advocate—and I have done for five years—the creation of a fiscal policy committee, which would be a counterpart to the Monetary Policy Committee. With assistance from the Office for National Statistics, it should have the job of policing the definitions in the accounts and the crucial task of vetting the forecasts to smoke out ropy assumptions.

The people who have considered these issues closely agree that the National Audit Office's auditing of forecasts is little more than a joke. I suspect that the NAO would privately agree. It spends £20,000 or £30,000 on the job, but countries that have such vetting of forecasts spend £500,000 or more on it. It is ridiculous that the number of man hours put in by the NAO could be considered remotely as serious vetting of the accounts.

The Government should be required to publish their estimates of where we are in the business cycle. Of course, that will be only one view, and it could be assessed by other commentators. Long-run liabilities, such as pensions, should be added to calculations of the debt stock. That would also bring much greater transparency to the accounts.

I shall conclude with a general point. If, just before Christmas, the Government have the intelligence to admit that there might conceivably be a recession one day and hence that we have not entered a world in which boom and bust have come to an end for ever, they will do themselves a huge favour. However, if the Minister tells us—I suspect that he will—that the Government are putting an end to boom and bust, Conservative Members can take heart from the fact that we know that we have been given a huge piece of ammunition for when that recession comes.

4.10 pm

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I was almost losing the will to live as I listened to the contributions of some Conservative Members—particularly when they claimed that the Labour Government are simply adapting the previous Government's policies. I should like to use the opportunity of this debate on public spending to outline one of the areas in which this Government most clearly differentiate themselves from the previous Government—our objective of using public spending to tackle the legacy of poverty and social exclusion bequeathed to us after 18 years of Tory Government.

Since 1979, poverty and inequality have increased dramatically. Almost a quarter of the UK's population live below the poverty line, and one third of those are children.

Communities are divided and workless, and in some instances have been so for two generations. The Chancellor's pre-Budget report set out clearly the principles that underpin our approach, and they could not be more different from those articulated by Conservative Members, who do not seem to be interested in poverty and social exclusion. They were certainly not interested in those problems during the 18 years of their misrule.

The pre-Budget report set out the Chancellor's target of a strong and productive economy in which the potential of every individual can contribute to and benefit from growing economic prosperity. By tackling the Tory legacy of boom and bust, the Government now have borrowing under control, and we have low inflation and low interest rates. Our major achievement is that 700,000 more people are in work. We have a target of full employment, which will ensure economic opportunity for all.

Mr. Letwin: I am interested to know whether the disease of which my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) spoke has spread to the Labour Back Benches. Does the hon. Lady genuinely believe that there will never be a recession under a Labour Government?

Ms Moran: I genuinely believe that we have introduced economic stability, in sharp contrast to two of the most severe recessions, which harmed people in my constituency and were responsible for one business going bust every three minutes of every working day when the hon. Gentleman's party was in power. That is not an experience that we will repeat.

As a result of the economic stability achieved by this Government which families and businesses in my constituency so desperately needed, we are now able to invest in our key public services and launch a crusade against poverty. That is already making a difference in constituencies such as mine, where youth unemployment has fallen sharply. The health action zone is targeting health resources in areas of greatest need, such as my central wards, where there are high levels of heart disease and child mortality.

In Luton, schools such as Wigmore primary, Lady Zia Wernher and Cardinal Newman have benefited from public spending and record levels of capital investment, allowing us not only to improve the fabric of the schools but to increase the number of classes and reduce class sizes. Major building works are under way at Luton and Dunstable hospital, where we will have updated wards and a new accident and emergency service. That is just a flavour of some of the effects of the additional £40 billion of spending on public services which the Government have achieved in just over two years, in sharp contrast to the dismal record of cuts during the 18 years of Tory Government.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the hon. Lady explain why, if so many extra resources are going to the health service, the accident and emergency unit at the Royal Surrey County hospital in Guildford is under threat of closure because of her Government's policies?

Ms Moran: I know that the major injection of money—£40 billion—into health and education is making significant improvements to health in my constituency and others throughout the country. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman's constituency seems to be less effective in achieving those results.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Is the hon. Lady admitting that her Government are conducting a policy of political vindictiveness against those parts of the United Kingdom that dare not to vote for her party?

Ms Moran: I shall respond to that less-than-coherent question simply by saying that I am proud to be a member of a party that is targeting resources on the basis of need and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Ms Keeble: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is an indictment of the Conservatives' management of the health service that when they left government, they left a deficit of £2.9 million in West Surrey health authority—the area that the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) is now bleating on about?

Ms Moran: My hon. Friend's point eloquently illustrates the economic incompetence of the previous Government, who left us with record debts and with poor services that had suffered from consistent cuts over 18 years.

We are now looking to the second comprehensive spending review, and I am proud that the Government have promised that there will be further increases in the amounts available for health and education, which will move further towards achieving our target of creating a fairer society by tackling inequality and poverty. The most difficult test, however, is whether, at the end of our term in office, we will be able to say that we offered opportunity to the very poorest and most socially excluded, because that task is infinitely more complex.

In the central wards of my constituency not only do families suffer high levels of child mortality, but the unemployment rate among black and Asian men is four times higher than the national average, and a third of housing is unfit or below acceptable standards of fitness. Around £50 million is needed to tackle our housing problems in Luton alone.

Before the Chancellor gets his pen out in the new year and does his public spending sums, I shall suggest a few ways in which we can make even more effective use of the additional resources going to our poorest neighbourhoods. First, we need to invest further in our housing stock and to streamline housing finance to enable us to make the most effective investment decisions, which will bring sustainable benefit to the communities who need it most. Secondly, we need a more radical approach to helping communities to help themselves. Thirdly, we need to reform the way in which we deal with public expenditure, to ensure that we achieve maximum impact, and it is important that every anti-poverty pound does just that.

I am aware that housing finance is not often discussed in this place. A subliminal anorak alert goes off when it is mentioned, and the sane flee the Chamber. However, we will not tackle the deep-rooted problems of poverty that we have inherited unless we reform housing finance and tackle the high levels of continuing unmet housing need and the £20 billion backlog of disrepair, which we also inherited from the previous Government.

[Ms Moran]

It is well known that housing benefit needs to be reformed to tackle the poverty trap, and I shall say little on the subject—save that long-term housing policy decisions are needed. Housing benefit spending is decreasing except in the private rented sector, where rent allowances are projected to rise from over £5 billion this year to £8 billion in 2002, which is, again, largely a legacy of the previous Government's policies, which moved housing investment away from bricks and mortar and into personal subsidy.

There are two ways for the Chancellor to achieve value for money and increase equality. The first is to link housing benefit spend to housing standards. Secondly, the Chancellor needs to address the problem of low-income home owners, who at the moment do not receive help with their housing costs. Certainly in my constituency—once dubbed the mortgage misery capital of the country—there are as many low-income home owners in need of housing support as there are people renting.

The action that this Government have taken to tackle housing benefit fraud is warmly to be welcomed. There is more to be done, but such action is none the less in sharp contrast to that of the previous Government, who removed financial incentives from local authorities that were determined to tackle housing benefit fraud. We should hear fewer pronouncements from the Opposition Benches, since the Conservatives' record in tackling housing benefit fraud was nothing short of lamentable.

This Government recognise that we cannot tackle poverty and social exclusion without tackling housing need. So, first, I want to say thank you to the Government and the Chancellor. Announced, but little noticed last week, was the housing investment programme of £2.1 billion—a 48 per cent. increase in housing spending to tackle the £5 billion backlog of disrepair that we inherited as a result of the previous Government's savage cuts.

Investment in housing in 1998–99 was double that in 1996-97. That is a result of this Government's delivering on the capital initiatives project—one of their very first schemes and a clear demonstration of their commitment to housing investment. As set out in the comprehensive spending review, we are now on target to spend an extra £4.7 billion this Parliament on improving our housing conditions and tackling housing need.

In addition, there have been very important changes, recently debated, on resource accounting, which begins in April 2001 and which could add a further £2 billion to housing revenue accounts in England in the first year and increases in line with inflation thereafter. This Government are wisely earmarking that money for tackling the backlog of disrepair and maintaining the value of a significant national asset—our housing stock.

In all of that, we have made a significant start in tackling the problems of unmet housing need and disrepair, but I should like to tempt Santa Brown, the Chancellor, to consider a possible millennium present to every family in poor housing. He could release for housing investment some of the £10.2 billion surplus that has accumulated in housing revenue accounts across the country. The Treasury accumulates about £1.4 billion a year in such surpluses, and a small contribution from that would go a long way to an excellent millennium present for many families who are in poor housing or, indeed, homeless.

I also ask the Chancellor to consider a bonfire of the regulations surrounding housing finance. With the introduction of resource accounting, virtually all local authorities' capital assets must make a return and they will not be able to spend past free capital. That therefore removes some of the need for the vast array of rules governing spending, borrowing and subsidy on housing revenue accounts. As a result, normal rules of financial prudence would apply to the management of housing revenue accounts and the bamboozle factor of housing finance, so beloved of people like me in my former career as a housing professional, would be removed.

Such moves would allow greater transparency for tenants, reduce bureaucracy and, most important, facilitate much clearer and cheaper decisions, involving fewer consultants, on where to spend money, on housing transfer, on public-private partnerships and on the retention of housing stock.

At the same time, we must review the general needs and the housing needs indexes—the systems that allocate housing resources, which are based on several factors many of which appear to work in opposite directions. In summary, we urgently need a more flexible framework that will better enable us to target areas of greatest need and solve local housing problems.

That brings me to a further point: tackling poverty and social exclusion is not just about unlocking more public money, but requires a revolution in the relationship between state and citizen and between central and local government. It is no coincidence that the poorest families are locked in social housing estates—partly because of allocation and benefit rules, which we much address, and partly because of lack of opportunities.

More than a third of social housing residents have weekly incomes of less than £100 a week and, according to a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, their unemployment rates are double those of people with other tenures. That is why it is so important that, if we want to address the most deep-rooted pockets of poverty, we must tackle social housing. I ask the Government and the Chancellor to look boldly at new policies such as tax incentives to encourage greater flexibility in the housing market and greater tenant control of social housing.

We need genuine, bottom-up community solutions to local problems. I think that the Government are committed to doing just that. That is why I welcome the introduction of new deal communities. Luton was one of the areas selected as a pilot. The scheme will greatly benefit local housing and job prospects.

If we are to tackle the worst aspects of poverty and social exclusion, we must also reform ourselves in this House. There are certainly areas in my constituency that are receiving unprecedented funding through various Government initiatives—zones, new deals and pilots too numerous to mention. If we are to make the most effective use of all the resources provided for our communities, we must ensure an intermeshing of all those zones and pilots.

We also ought to look in the comprehensive spending review at our funding framework. Government still operate in spending silos, and that makes it all the more difficult, particularly at community level, to effect joined-up action. We need much greater integration of

budgets across the public sector, based not so much on departmental silos but on outcomes and areas. I know that we are making that move, but perhaps we need to do so more speedily.

I have listened to Conservative Members' arguments and can only conclude that they are not aware that this Government are making a major impact on constituencies like mine through increases in public spending—the £40 billion going into health and education, the new deal, which has reduced youth unemployment, the working families tax credit, which has put an extra £17 a week in the pockets of Luton families, and the national minimum wage, which has lifted many of those families out of poverty.

I am angry even so, because only now are Luton families recovering from the devastation of the Tory decades—from record repossessions; from record business failures; and from record poverty, which increased during their term in office.

Mr. Ruffley: It is all very depressing.

Ms Moran: As we hear, the Conservatives have learned nothing. As we have heard in this debate, they would not only return Luton families to the misery that they endured during the Tory decades, but scrap the new deal, the working families tax credit and the national minimum wage, which have benefited Luton. The Conservatives believe that our public spending is reckless and irresponsible, and would instead substitute their nonsensical tax guarantee and attempt to privatise our health service.

I am proud of this Government's record on public spending, and of the further spending that will be forthcoming. I warn Luton families that the Tories have learned nothing from their decades in power. Families in my constituency should look to this Government to increase their opportunities.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next hon. Member, I should say to the House that I understand that the winding-up speeches will start at 6.20 pm. I have no powers to instruct anyone, but there are 11 Back-Bench Members who wish to speak. As this is the last debate of the year, it would be nice if everyone could get in, but I am in the hands of the House.

4.40 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): In support of the amendment tabled by my right hon. and hon. Friends, I draw the attention of the House to the lamentable and discourteous performance of the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Select Committee on the Treasury last Tuesday. He did not do very well, particularly from Mr. Alastair Campbell's point of view. He managed to elicit from the *Daily Mail* the next day a headline to the effect that the "Tax burden *is* going up".

We all know that that is the case, but we had the unedifying sight of spin doctors from Millbank scuttling around, trying to tell various newspapers that taxes had not gone up at all and that they were falling. They were trying to say that black was white.

When I heard of all that nonsense going on, I was reminded of the words of Charles Henry Grosvenor, the well-known Republican Congressman of the 19th century, who said:

"Figures won't lie, but liars figure."

That tells us all that we need to know about the Labour party and the way in which it conducts business when it is dealing with the truth and the figures in respect of fiscal policy and taxes.

Mr. Love *rose—*

Mr. Ruffley: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, with a due sense of dread and anticipation.

Mr. Love: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The amendment that he supports calls for increases in public expenditure and, at the same time, reductions in taxation. Is that credible?

Mr. Ruffley: I am sorry that I gave way. The hon. Gentleman should have listened to the excellent speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), who made it perfectly clear—not a difficult point to grasp—that one can cut non-essential and, indeed, wasteful public expenditure at the same time as increasing real-terms spending on the things that we care about, such as schools and hospitals. If the hon. Gentleman had been listening properly, he would know that, for many months and even years, we have been saying that that can easily be achieved—more expenditure on the things that we care about and less on the things that are wasteful.

Let me continue my odyssey on Labour tax policy. We must examine what the Chancellor said in the Select Committee. He was economical with the actualité. I must keep within the bounds of parliamentary language, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you would expect me to do.

I wonder whether hon. Members can guess how many times the Chancellor of the Exchequer last Tuesday refused to answer a simple question about the difference between the share of gross domestic product taken by tax in 1996-97—in other words, the tax burden that he inherited in his first year—and his projection for 2001-02, the last year of this Parliament. He refused to answer that simple question not once, twice or 10 times, but on no fewer than 19 occasions. It was a lamentable performance.

I shall take the liberty of reading out for the record the figures that the Chancellor was too coy to acknowledge last Tuesday. They are his own figures, not Conservative central office figures or House of Commons Library figures. I quote from the Green Book, as Labour Members know it, or the pre-Budget report, PBR, from November. In it, we can discover the key information.

The tax burden that Labour inherited in 1996–97 was 35.3 per cent. On the Chancellor's own figures, the outturn for 1998–99, the next year, was 37.4 per cent, the year after that 37 per cent, then rising to 36.8 per cent.—[Hon. Members: "Falling."] and 37.2 per cent.

The illiteracy, economic and otherwise, of Labour Members is astonishing. If they cannot tell the difference between the 35.3 per cent. that they inherited, and the tax burden in the last year of this Parliament, 37.2 per cent,

[Mr. Ruffley]

they should not hold the office that they hold. They should start reading the material that their own Ministers produce. *[Interruption.]*

I thought it important to get that on the record. The maundering and muttering from Labour Members discloses that they do not know the truth when it stares them in the face. We should look at a further set of figures, produced by the Office for National Statistics. On the key tax burden test of net taxes and social security contributions as a share of GDP, we see that, for every quarter since the Government came into office, the tax burden has been higher than that which they inherited from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke).

That needs to be emphasised, because we believe in having an honest debate about taxation. Judging from my mailbag, my constituents also want an honest debate. The real mistake that the Chancellor made—he made quite a few last Tuesday—was to answer in the following terms, when he was, for the 17th or 18th time, asked whether the tax burden had gone up since 1996-97. He said:

"We made only a number of promises on tax when we came into power and one . . . of them was not in relation to the tax burden."

Why would the Chancellor mouth such a defensive line, if the tax burden was stable, or if the tax burden—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman goes beyond the conventions of the House. The Chancellor does not utter lies. No hon. Member utters lies.

Mr. Ruffley: With the greatest respect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I said "line". I think that the record will show "line".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: My apologies for picking the hon. Gentleman up.

Mr. Ruffley: The Chancellor is guilty of many things, and being economical with the actualité is but one of them. *[Interruption.]* If hon. Members want to make interventions, I am happy to take them, pathetic and dismal as they are likely to be. However, I repeat that the Chancellor said that the Government had not made a promise about the tax burden. Why would he say that if the tax burden had decreased or been stable? The press rightly deduced that the Chancellor uttered those words because the tax burden had become heavier, as the PBR shows beyond doubt or peradventure.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another reason for the Chancellor's defensive line? In 1996, the Prime Minister told the *Financial Times* that there would be

"no increase in taxation at all."

Mr. Ruffley: My hon. Friend makes a typically powerful and accurate point. The Prime Minister used those words and my constituents—and, I am sure, my hon. Friend's constituents—have observed that the Labour party says one thing and does another; they understand that £40 billion in stealth taxes has been imposed on them during the Chancellor's tenure.

Our astonishment at the Chancellor's refusal to acknowledge that the tax burden had increased when his figures demonstrated otherwise was highlighted by *The Guardian* among the many other newspapers that gave him a bad write-up the next day. *The Guardian* reported that the Chancellor had

"conveniently left out Labour's first year in office, the year when the tax burden went up sharply as a result of Mr. Brown's early fiscal tightening.

It was all a fairly unedifying spectacle."

It went on to refer to a

"half hour of wriggling and squirming"

by the Chancellor before the Select Committee.

We do not have to look far for the reasons for the Chancellor's obfuscation. Tax is a potent issue for voters. The Chancellor understands that he cannot admit—in public or otherwise—that the tax burden has increased because he knows the damage that the Government will sustain when that is widely accepted. Conservative Members will pursue that between now and the next general election, and beyond.

Dr. Palmer: I am confused by the hon. Gentleman's comments. He tells us that the public are aware of what he alleges are tax increases; he also tells us that the public do not know about them. Which view is correct?

Mr. Ruffley: The public know that the tax burden has increased after last week's Treasury shenanigans and the truthful reporting that followed the Chancellor's dismal performance. However, the full magnitude and range of stealth taxes—on personal pensions, mortgage tax relief, married couples allowance—will become known and the public will gradually understand that they are paying more tax across a range of activities. The full force of our argument will be developed in the weeks and months ahead.

It would not be so bad if the tax burden figures in the pre-Budget report told the whole story, but they do not. The tax burden is greater than the published figures suggest for two reasons. The first is the fiddling of the working families tax credit and the way in which it is scored. Under the European system of accounts 95, working families tax credit—which is simply rebadged family credit—scores as public expenditure. The only way in which working families tax credit could be scored as negative taxation is if the benefit to individuals did not exceed the amount of tax that they pay. The scoring of negative taxation by the Chancellor cannot be justified under ESA 95. It should be scored in the Red Book and the PBR as public spending. Yet, in contravention of ESA 95 procedure, the Chancellor scores it as negative income tax. That has the effect of making the tax burden appear to decrease. That is the first fiddle, which artificially deflates an increasing tax burden.

The second fiddle relates to the assumption that the Chancellor makes about excise duty increases. With a great fanfare, he said that he would not increase excise and road fuel duty by 6 per cent. annually—it could be anything less than that. When I asked him in the Treasury Committee what assumptions he had made in his projections for increases in road fuel duty, he said that they related to the retail prices index and inflation only. The problem is that if an increase is anything over inflation, we are looking at an even bigger tax burden than that published in his November pre-Budget report.

That raises another interesting technical issue, on which I genuinely seek the views of the Chief Secretary and those on the Treasury Bench. The code for fiscal stability, which was published in November 1998, is an important document—do not get me wrong—and page 9 clearly states:

"Every economic and fiscal projection"—

which would include the PBR—

"contained in any report published under this Code"—

which of course such documents are, should give—

"so far as reasonably practicable . . . a material impact on the fiscal outlook"

and,

"b. where the fiscal impact of these decisions and circumstances cannot be quantified with reasonable accuracy by the day the projections are finalised, these impacts should be noted as specific fiscal risks."

If the Chancellor is not quantifying what road tax duty increases might be, we have a prima facie case of a specific fiscal risk that should be flagged up. It has not been flagged up. That technical question is giving some commentators cause for concern, and I hope that the Treasury will do the House the courtesy of answering that specific point.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ruffley: I am more than happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, who is an assiduous intervener, although not to much effect these days.

Mr. Davies: On fiscal risk, the hon. Gentleman is in favour of the tax guarantee of reducing the burden of taxation year after year. When we debated the Finance Bill, the Tories voted essentially for £6 billion of tax cuts. How would he fund those cuts? Which services would he cut? He has mentioned welfare. Would he cut welfare benefits for the disabled or the unemployed? Where would he make the cuts, or are his remarks simply hot air?

Mr. Ruffley: Conservative Members would attempt to cut social security spending where it is clearly wasteful and fraudulent—a promise that the Labour party has signally failed to honour. The hon. Gentleman will find that, in the previous financial year, the departmental budget for social security spending was about £97.3 billion. By the end of this Parliament—in the last full financial year, which is 2001–02—it will be about £113 billion. That is a real-terms increase. To make it simple for the hon. Gentleman, social security spending in real terms has gone up and his party said that it would go down. We are talking about waste and fraud and there is a lot of meat on that particular bone, although it is not the only example for which we would have a proper audit to find savings that could be used to run a prudent fiscal policy.

I shall conclude because I want to comply with your polite request, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we speak only for so long as is absolutely necessary. That will give other hon. Members the chance to answer some of the unanswerable questions that have been put by my hon. Friends. The Government's fiscal policy lacks not only clarity, but honesty: £40 billion of stealth taxes have been heaped on to hard-working families and businesses, and that is why the tax burden has gone up. Those are facts that the public will be made increasingly well aware of over the next few months in the run-up to the general election and the Government will pay a price for playing fast and loose with those facts. We can say, without any doubt at all, that Conservative Members will be working hard to prosecute the case against the Labour party. That case is that it is making a great lie of its fiscal policy.

5 pm

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): I want to concentrate on the capital investment aspect of public investment.

The Victorian era produced immense investment in public works, incomparable with anything that had gone before. Investment in schools, hospitals, prisons, town halls, universities, government buildings, bridges, viaducts and roads was mostly as a result of public expenditure. Much of the result of that expenditure is still with us, but for most of the century this country has been negligent about maintaining and replacing its public assets.

Many schools and hospitals have fallen prey to self-evident dilapidation; action has been postponed for a long time, and is overdue. Public servants are working in accommodation that is drab and unkempt and inferior in quality, decoration and convenience to that experienced by their counterparts in the private sector. Public patience is running out with roads and railways that have not been developed to satisfy modern demands. There is now a huge backlog of investment, which will present a major challenge in the new century.

The economist Professor J. K. Galbraith decried America, describing it as a country of private affluence and public squalor. That has also become true of Britain in the second half of the 20th century. It is tempting to denounce the current state of affairs as fecklessness on a grand scale, but it is worse than that. For 18 years, starting in 1979, a Conservative Government made it a deliberate act of ideology to propound "Public spending bad, private spending good". Boom-and-bust management was also popular during that period. Whenever savings in public expenditure were necessary, the politically expedient way of cutting capital spending was chosen. What people had not had they would not grieve over—or would not grieve over as much as they would if they had lost what they had.

Between the financial year 1993–94 and the election year 1996–97, current departmental expenditure rose from £135 billion to £148 billion, but capital spending plummeted from £21 billion to £13 billion in the same three-year period. The Treasury's statistical analysis reveals a similar pattern in regard to capital spending by both local authorities and public corporations. As the 1997 general election approached, current spending for immediate effect was boosted, while capital spending that no one would miss immediately was axed. Nor could it be argued that the need to cut taxes lay behind the demise of so much capital spending. In the financial year 1996-97, capital spending amounted to only 8 per cent. of departmental expenditure.

As a result of the ups and downs in capital spending, commitment to the planning of investment programmes is fitful. Schemes that have long been expected are postponed and there is no definite date for their start; alternatively, an organisation is suddenly galvanised into frenzied activity to spend money that has unexpectedly

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become available. That unpredictability of public works means that complementary private investment that depends on it is delayed, and takes place afterwards rather than alongside the investment. That has happened in the case of the docklands development here in London, and is now happening in the case of the Thames gateway development.

I am not sure whether this is another aspect of uncertain financial backing. What is definite is that many public capital projects have a very bad reputation for being over budget and overdue. The Jubilee line extension—£1.5 billion over budget and 18 months overdue—is but the latest in a series of public projects that have been inadequately controlled. No modernising Government, faced with today's tidal wave of demand for investment in public infrastructure, could or should tolerate the inadequate scale, the fluctuation and the poor control of capital investment in the public sector. We have—like a farmer eating his own seedcorn—long lived off a legacy of Victorian capital, but a consistent approach to updating and replacing that legacy is now urgently required.

Perhaps it is not surprising that public capital investment is out of sight and out of mind when public expenditure is examined. Unlike a private business's accounts—which account clearly for the business's assets, their depreciation, and new investment—Government accounts barely distinguish between capital and current account spending. Government accounts paint a picture which is, on a large scale, the equivalent of a small shopkeeper living out of the till. They are concerned with incoming and outgoing cash, regardless of whether that cash is spent on capital projects, with benefits continuing for many years, or on immediate consumption.

The confusion between capital and current expenditure makes financial markets suspicious of large-scale Government borrowing. The financial markets have no means of knowing whether borrowing will go on current expenditure, to get a Government out of a political hole, or to provide a valuable long-lasting capital asset. The consequent limit on public borrowing—the point at which the confidence of the financial markets tends to lapse—has in itself led to underfunding of public infrastructure.

The Government's code for fiscal stability—which has already been mentioned in the debate, and was approved by the House a year ago—will go some way towards ending the ambiguity about Government borrowing. In particular, the golden rule—that borrowing will go only for investment—and the sustainable investment rule, which will keep net debt as a percentage of GDP at prudent levels, should both reassure financial markets as they are seen to be applied by the Government.

Another consequence of Government accounting is the lack of any allowance for the depreciation of capital assets, so that there is no systematic allowance for maintenance expenditure. There is also no financial penalty for keeping assets, once acquired, idle or underused. Therefore, across the country, Government land and buildings continue to sit unused for years.

The broad inadequacy of public accounts, and the consequences flowing from it, is being dealt with in the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, which recently received its Second Reading. The Bill will ensure that each Department provides the equivalent of a profit and loss account, a cash flow statement covering current spending, and a balance sheet accounting for the value of assets, depreciation and investment. Additionally, there will be a statement of resources used against specific departmental objectives which will clarify the relative allocation of resources.

Those reforms will potentially enhance the transparency and accountability of public spending and highlight the adequacy of capital investment. In doing so, they will also focus the debate and go a long way towards eliminating some of the inadequacies of public sector investment that I mentioned.

The reform of Government accounts—when taken with public service agreements, which give individual Departments detailed efficiency targets—should lead to a major increase in public sector effectiveness and productivity. The changes may also make possible a better debate on the adequacy of capital investment and on the purposes for which it is allocated.

Taken alone, however, the changes will not increase the amount of investment capital available to the Government, and they will not improve the record of management control of public sector projects. The aim of public-private partnerships—and, more particularly, of private finance initiatives—is to accomplish both those goals.

With the private finance initiative, the investor knows the exact purpose—which could be assessed as a specific project—of the investment. Moreover, the private partner is able to exert control over management of the project in return for shouldering some of the inherent risks. Generally, the private partner has expertise and experience in a particular type of project, and is therefore well qualified to exert project management control.

The traditional alternative to such investment has been for investors to provide money by way of bonds or a similar device, but that requires the public sector agency to shoulder all the risks of overextended budgets and overruns in time. Above all, the private finance initiative provides someone with a vested interest in ensuring that a public asset, whether a hospital or a bridge, is properly maintained during the lifetime for which it is designed.

Following a traditional route for public sector capital projects—that is, Treasury borrowing and a project controlled entirely in the public sector—would not allow adequate investment overall. It would mean the public purse taking all the risks and would not necessarily attract private sector expertise and experience in management.

Alternatively, privatisation means sacrificing public operational control, and potentially some public interests, just to raise the initial capital for the project.

Public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives are a third way. They retain public operational control while lifting the ceiling on public sector investment and overcoming the inadequacy of public sector asset maintenance.

The old ideological fixations must die away in favour of arrangements that work. People want not a contest between public and private, but a cross-fertilisation of the best of each. Their instinct is right.

Mr. Tyrie: I do not want to wreck the hon. Gentleman's career, but he is giving quite the most thoughtful speech that we have heard from the Labour Benches this afternoon—and, indeed, for some time.

He is quite right about resource accounting, but does he think it possible to draw a clear distinction between capital and current spending where no income stream is derived from the investment? Is it possible to clarify that distinction—as is being attempted in the accounts—to the degree that the Government are planning?

Mr. Beard: Yes, it is far more possible than what is happening now. There may be some grey areas as to what is capital or whether it is being consumed currently, but the vast bulk of projects can be accounted for in terms of capital. That would be a great improvement.

The instinct of people in looking for a cross-fertilisation of the best of private and public is right. Without a new approach to public accounting that values capital assets and ensures their maintenance—as well as the new arrangements for fund raising and risk sharing—this country will rot. A rising tide of dereliction and decay will disfigure all our environments.

Any fair and progressive modern society must have a proper balance between public service and private activities. The steps now being taken to display and manage public expenditure more effectively are essential to achieving that balance, and essential to modernising Britain.

5.13 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard), as we have been doing a lot of recently in Committee. I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) that the hon. Gentleman has made one of the more considered speeches that we have heard from the Labour Benches today.

It strikes me as odd that a Government motion and debate on the economy has been sidelined to the last sitting day of this millennium, before Christmas, and that large parts of the motion are concerned not with defending the Government's record on the economy, but with criticising their own warped, soundbite-ridden and factually incorrect version of the Opposition's policies. That trend was repeated time and time again by Labour Members in the debate. One would think that the Conservatives were still in office.

I do not think that any of us would deny that the economy is in a relatively healthy state at the moment. By most measurements—unemployment, inflation and borrowing figures—the economy is doing fairly well. However, the key considerations when judging the Government's economic record must be threefold. We must ask, first, how the UK is doing internationally—we are continually told that that is important, and I agree; secondly, how well spread the current prosperity is throughout the country and whether all our subjects are enjoying the alleged investment boom; and—

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Subjects? I thought that we were all citizens now.

Mr. Loughton: We still live in a democratic monarchy, even though Government Members have done their level best to reverse that—and may yet succeed.

Thirdly, we must ask whether the Government's policies will achieve long-term sustainability or are storing up trouble for the future. All three considerations produce rather worrying results and show the Government's economic policy in a different light from what they would have us believe.

I had hoped that we would have a proper debate, be able to question the Government freely and receive genuine answers, but those hopes were dashed a little after 12.30 today. The culture that has built up—it pervaded the opening speeches today—is that to oppose the Government, to question the basis of any of their policies or merely to scrutinise closely the validity of their figures is nothing less than a cardinal sin; it is anathema, in the Vatican of new Labour, to be at all critical. The riposte is always, "How dare you?"

We have seen that attitude yet again this afternoon. The motion smacks of such arrogance and intolerance. A good example is a written answer on company bankruptcies that I received recently. It would be of particular interest to the hon. Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran), if she were here. If Labour Members are to be believed, the years 1979–97 were a period littered with businesses going under and since 1997, miraculously, it has been a one-way growth trip.

I questioned that attitude and asked the Minister then responsible, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), how many companies had gone out of business since May 1997. The answer was interesting. It said:

"Companies House maintains statistics on the number of companies in liquidation . . . During the period from 5 May 1997 to 27 June 1999, 105,540 companies were reported as dissolved by means of the voluntary procedures . . . 118,227 companies were dissolved other than by section 652 . . . making a total of 262,321. As of 27 June 1999, 69,479 companies were in course of liquidation."—[*Official Report*, 1 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 229W.]

That gives a slightly different angle on economic prosperity as experienced by businesses in this country over the past two and a half years.

I then asked the same question of the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, and her answer was rather different:

"There are no official statistics on the number of business closures. Collating them would impose too great a burden on business. Quarterly estimates from Barclays Bank show that there were 922,000 business closures in England and Wales in the 27 months between April 1997 and June 1999 . . .

Other indicators confirm that business closures are lower than in previous years. There have been 97,700 company and individual insolvencies in England and Wales since April 1997, 32 per cent. fewer than when insolvencies peaked in the early 1990s."—[*Official Report*, 22 November 1999; Vol. 239, c. 163-64W.]

The figures were freely available and in July the Minister responsible willingly, unflinchingly, gave them to me, but his successor claimed that the figures were not accessible and slanted those that she did produce with some rather spurious comparison with the early 1990s. To question the validity of information issued by the Government is anathema: "how dare you ask for it?" is the constant tone.

Liz Blackman (Erewash): Did the hon. Gentleman also request information on the number of business start-ups, and does he intend to mention the number of jobs created since 1997 and the present number of job vacancies, which runs close to 1 million?

Mr. Loughton: The hon. Lady is right. Back in the 1980s, the then Government would have liked to see the

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figures for net job creations. According to the hon. Member for Luton, South and others, those 18 years were a one-way trip of business closures, but of course that was not what happened. Many new businesses started, in the same way as many have started in the past two years. However, many of those—probably more than 1 million—have gone bust. We should be more balanced, as well as more transparent, about the figures that we are attempting to analyse.

More evidence of the great arrogance that is displayed by Ministers when we question them was relayed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley).

Mr. David Taylor: There is nobody behind you.

Mr. Loughton: There are many people behind me—spiritually, if not physically. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds revealed the amazing confession by the Chancellor in the Select Committee on the Treasury a week ago. The Chancellor later denied it, and Ministers have repeated that denial today. However, there is no questioning the statistics which show that the amount of tax taken as a percentage of GDP has risen from 35.3 per cent. in 1997 to 37.2 per cent. In anybody's book—indeed, in anybody's warped calculations—that is an increase in the tax burden of some 2 per cent., even without taking into consideration the fiddled accounting of the working families tax credit. By comparison, the tax burden in Germany is 37.1 per cent. and in the US it is much lower, at 29.7 per cent. of GDP.

Mr. Taylor: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman's argument carefully. He said earlier that the Government would be judged on three basic themes at the next general election—how they had done internationally, how they had distributed growth between groups of people and geographically, and the sustainability of the economic policies that they had pursued. The hon. Gentleman did not suggest that the electorate would rely on the figures for the tax burden in deciding how they might vote.

Mr. Loughton: I am impressed that the hon. Gentleman has listened so closely. He mentioned the three criteria that I flagged up earlier, and one could include the tax burden under any of them, starting with the international context. That is why I have just put the tax burden in the context of what is experienced by our major competitors. This country's tax burden is higher than—and rising above—those in Germany and the US, and that makes this country far less competitive and its subjects poorer.

If the Government are so proud of their economic record—as they would have us believe judging by the complacency of the motion—why are not they brave enough to admit the real figures? I challenged the Minister earlier on the point that not a single independent economic forecaster agrees with Ministers' fiddled premise, because everybody knows that the tax take as a percentage of the economy has gone up, is going up and will have gone up by the end of this Parliament compared with May 1997. The only way to claim otherwise would be by using fantasy figures.

In actual terms, a retired couple, for example, on a total pension of some £5,750 and a modest amount of savings, will have paid £1,306 extra in tax over the past two and a half years, even if they do not own a car, have a mortgage or take foreign holidays. In real terms, that is a lot of money.

The independence of the Bank of England is another key plank of the Government's self-congratulatory motion, which praises the new monetary policy framework that is supposedly delivering stability and steady growth. The Chief Secretary could not resist the poke at the idea that the Conservative party opposes independence for the Bank of England, but I am not sure that it is true. It takes no account of the establishment by the Conservative Treasury team of a high-level monetary policy commission to examine Bank of England independence, and to determine how real independence could work.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester that the Monetary Policy Committee is not fully independent at present. It is a matter that needs proper consideration. Making the MPC independent is not something that should be rushed into within two days of coming to power—especially when such a full-scale constitutional change had not been mentioned before.

There is great merit in the notion of an independent Bank of England, but the MPC must have no chance of exerting political influence. Certainly, the terms of office of its members must resemble much more closely those applying in the Bundesbank in Germany and in the Federal Reserve Bank in the United States. Longer terms of office render office holders more impervious to political intimidation and control.

We also need a properly resourced MPC that gets far more research from the Bank of England—a recent bone of contention. The Government's claim to take credit when rates go down, and their "not me, guv" mentality when they go up, are absolutely absurd. The Government issue strong signals about the direction in which the Chancellor wants rates to go. Just this week, for example, the right hon. Gentleman was quoted as signalling a new year rate rise to the Select Committee on the Treasury.

It is also not entirely true to talk about the great period of stability that we have enjoyed under the MPC. A report by the journal *Economic Affairs* states that there has been

"a clear increase in financial market volatility"

since the establishment of the MPC, which is criticised for the many changes in interest rates that it has made and for creating a mood of uncertainty around each monthly meeting.

In addition, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research has said that it would have made little difference to the economy if rates had been left unchanged at the 6 per cent. that the Government inherited. Professor Kent Matthews of the Cardiff business school, who carried out the research, stated:

"If the Bank was trying to reduce volatility in the markets there is little evidence that it has succeeded. If volatility of financial markets is a constraint on the setting of interest rates, the MPC has clearly given it little weight."

We should have a proper debate on this matter, and not simply repeat unsubstantiated and vague mantras about who does or does not oppose Bank of England

independence. We want to determine the extent of the Bank's independence, and to decide whether giving it full independence would permit it to operate more effectively, as many Conservative Members would like.

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman was talking about the volatility of interest rates and about whether the Monetary Policy Committee of an independent Bank of England could reduce that volatility. I share his concern, and I asked the Governor of the Bank of England that very question in the Select Committee. His answer was that, although small interest rate changes might have happened more frequently since the establishment of the MPC, the peaks and troughs of interest rates had flattened out. He argued that that was a sign that volatility had been reduced.

Mr. Loughton: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is right, as that is in line with what has happened to interest rates internationally. When rates averaged between 5 and 6 per cent., changes of a quarter of a per cent. were the order of the day. The situation is rather different when rates average between 10 and 12 per cent., when changes are usually of about 0.5 to 1 per cent. My challenge is to the illusion that the MPC is infallible and that the stability of financial markets has been underpinned by its existence.

The real increase in the UK's GDP is modest when compared with that of our international competitors. The increase for 1999 is estimated at 1.75 per cent., and is expected to be at 2.3 per cent. in two years. However, the comparable figures for France are 2.4 per cent. and 2.9 per cent. For the United States, they are 3.8 per cent. and about 2.5 per cent. For Europe in general, the figures are 2.1 per cent. and 2.8 per cent., and for the countries in the OECD they are 2.8 per cent. and about 2.6 per cent.

The figures show that for the next two years, growth in the United Kingdom is forecast to be lower than that of any of its major competitors. Nor does the current account balance look so brilliant in an international context. We have a deficit of about 1.5 per cent. of gross domestic product, falling to only 1.2 per cent. two years out, whereas France has a surplus of 2.4 per cent., the European Union has a surplus of 0.4 per cent. and the OECD shows a small decline of less than 1 per cent. We are doing pretty badly on that international table. Two years out, our interest rates are forecast to be quite a bit higher than those of the EU and still higher than those of the United States.

There is no cause for the Government's over-complacent attitude.

Mr. Love: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind I will not, because of the time.

I am worried about a number of warning signs on the horizon. Before Labour Members, who cannot take this scrutiny culture, accuse me of trying to talk Britain down, I am just being realistic and—to use one of their phrases—prudent for the long term. The headline growth of average earnings has now accelerated to 4.9 per cent., well above the Bank of England tolerance level of 4.5 per cent. In the service sector it is much higher, running at more than 5.2 per cent., and that is before winter bonuses have filtered through into the system. That is too high to be compatible with the inflation target.

A chief economist in the City, Michael Saunders from Salomon Brothers International Ltd, has said:

"You have to take an optimistic view on productivity to conclude that pay growth of 5 per cent. is consistent with meeting the 2.5 per cent. inflation target."

But inflation in the service sector is running well above the headline rate, at 4 per cent. Raw material costs rose by 2.9 per cent. in November alone—the biggest monthly increase since November 1994. That is an annualised rate of more than a 9 per cent. increase in raw materials. Those are serious inflationary pressures.

The Chancellor told us that productivity is the acid test of economic success. Productivity growth in 1997, when the previous Government left office, was 2.2 per cent.—it is now just 0.7 per cent. On a GDP per capita table, if the UK is the benchmark of 100, France stands at 105, Germany at 113 and the United States is way ahead at 137.

I am also concerned that the overheating of the City and the south-east of England is completely out of sync with the rest of the country. The extended effect of the City of London across a widening region is cause for worry. The commutability of the City extends up to Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and even York, and to Oxfordshire and Wiltshire in the west, as well as the traditional commuter belts in my part of the country, in Sussex, Kent and Surrey. The knock-on effect on property prices and on the service sector providing services for the beneficiaries of that wealth leads to great distortions.

There are also great distortions between the public and private sector. For we have grave problems with the social services in west Sussex. In sunny old west Sussex, where apparently we all live in castles, there are serious problems. To give him his due, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), came down to see us two weeks ago. Crawley has a 40 per cent. vacancy rate for child care social workers, and there is a 40 per cent. vacancy rate among orthopaedic workers in the health service in the north of our county. That comes as no surprise, because the hourly rate for care assistants employed by social services departments is £5.17, compared with McDonald's at Gatwick airport, which pays £7.60 an hour. Those wealth effects extend a long way from the City of London.

The south-east of England will always be at a premium vis-a-vis the rest of the country, because of our location—our nearness to the channel, the airports and the M25—and because of City salaries. We will always act as a magnet for investment and for wealth. But the Government are making matters worse by forcing enormous extra house building figures on us and failing to condemn the Crowe report.

A worrying issue that has been raised increasingly over the past few weeks, and which many of us referred to in the debate on the Queen's Speech, is the great imbalance between the north and the south. If you think that you have seen imbalances so far, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you have not seen anything yet if the Government have their way by concentrating south-east England into the powerhouse for economic growth within the top 10 regions of Europe. It will be utterly unsustainable.

[Mr. Loughton]

I shall not embark on some of the regional contrasts that are possible, as I am aware of the time. However, among the warning signs mentioned by several hon. Members, the savings ratio has collapsed from 9.4 per cent. to 5.8 per cent., which is very worrying.

Finally, I shall turn to the tax burden and the quality of services. Even Government Back Benchers are able, when under pressure, to discuss the £40.7 billion levied in extra taxes—largely by stealth—over the life of this Parliament. The burdens of regulation are added to the tax burden, and administering pay-as-you-earn schemes, the working families tax credit and the working time directive has a special impact on small businesses. Those burdens are affecting UK competitiveness, which is sinking fast.

Using stealth taxes, the Chancellor has gathered in a virtually all-time record haul of extra revenue. National insurance rises will hit 4 million middle income earners, despite the assurances of the Paymaster General that no one would be hit. In addition, the Chancellor will reap £3 billion in unexpected windfalls because of the Government's policy for dealing with pensions mis-selling. As more people return to the public sector pension scheme, they will bring with them short-term revenue, but the Government will eventually have to pay out when they retire. Self-assessment for corporation tax and up-front payment bring cash flow advantages to the Government, and the stamp duty bonanza from booming equity markets is disguising the uncompetitiveness of stamp duty in the UK. At 0.5 per cent., ours is the highest of any major equity market.

For all the Government's embarrassment of riches, what evidence is there that ordinary people are experiencing an improvement in the quality of their public services? What evidence is there of secure and sustainable long-term improvement? There is certainly no such evidence in Sussex or in my constituency. My local hospital has some of the longest waiting times in the country. We have had an above-average share of the 500,000 people who are waiting to get on waiting lists. A constant stream of complaints comes to me from people whose operations have been cancelled for a third time and who are pressing towards the 18-month treatment requirement. Hospitals in the north of west Sussex, at Haywards Heath and Crawley, are under threat. West Sussex health authority has a record deficit.

Raids through standard spending assessment adjustments on the shire counties in favour of northern metropolitan boroughs have left our social services underfunded by £7 million, although we are spending more than the amounts recommended by the Government. Our residential homes have been threatened, as have home helps. Cuts of £4.2 million have been instigated.

On law and order, my constituents certainly are not seeing the effect of the Government's supposed extra investment. No police station in my constituency opens in the evenings or at weekends. The existence of at least one station is under threat. No patrol cars operate from stations in the whole of my constituency. Sussex has 161 fewer officers than it did two and a half years ago—the second biggest cut in the country. In addition, we are bottom of the league on crime clear-up figures.

There is no evidence that all the extra tax is feeding into better services. On transport, the phrase "standstill Britain" could have been invented for Worthing and the A27. Every trunk road improvement scheme for the whole of west Sussex has been scrapped by the Government. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester said, the amount of money spent is not the only important thing. The quality and targeting of spending matter too.

The Government's motion is arrogant and complacent. It is, therefore, entirely in keeping with the attitude of a Government who are completely unwilling to tolerate criticism and who have set themselves above legitimate scrutiny by the House. When one wades through the fiddled figures, selective quotations from tables and worn-out soundbites, one finds many reasons why the Government cannot afford to be so complacent and impervious to challenge.

Internationally, the UK's performance is not so rosy. Domestically, a creeping cancer of economic apartheid is threatening to fragment the United Kingdom even more thoroughly than the Government have through their constitutional vandalism. When the Government are flush with revenue from their stealth tax crusade, the exaggerated spending figures of which always we hear are having next to no affect on the quality of public services. Their policy will soon prove unsustainable. It is storing up trouble for the future. The Government would be better advised to address the real long-term problems with sustainable solutions, rather than wallowing in sickening self-congratulation, when most of the achievements that they claim are, in fact, down to outside forces.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. In a spirit of seasonal goodwill, may I appeal to hon. Members to show some generosity to each other in the time remaining? Otherwise many will be disappointed.

5.40 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who spoke for the Opposition, asked a valid question about the Labour party's contribution to the century. The Labour party has served the country in government for 23 years out of 100. Although I am proud enough that we founded the welfare state, set up the NHS and established comprehensive education, I would be pleased to assure him, if he were in his seat, that the best is yet to come.

Of course, if hon. Members were judging us by the record of previous Labour Governments, we would be waiting for the mid-term economic crisis, but it has not occurred. In an independent article VI assessment of the British economy published on 24 November, the International Monetary Fund describes the "remarkable" performance of the British economy. It says:

> "The public finances, in particular, have clearly shifted into the 'sound' range, from significant deficits to a small surplus".

The present Labour Government are out-performing not only all previous Labour Governments but the last Tory Government.

What delights me especially is that this is the Labour Government who have learned that economic competence and social justice can go hand in hand. It is odd that, in a debate on public spending, no hon. Member has mentioned today's tremendous announcement about the Government's extra contribution to relief of debt for

the world's poorest countries—a very creditable announcement at this time of the year and a great tribute to the Jubilee 2000 coalition that has fought with such honour and decency for debt relief.

Mr. Letwin: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that Conservative Members thoroughly support that proposal, unlike many others.

Mr. Kidney: I am also happy to acknowledge the contribution of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) when he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

As ever, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is not short of advice; it does not come just from those in the House. The IMF tells him that there is

"no case for relaxing fiscal policy".

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that

"only a small fiscal loosening is compatible with the Chancellor meeting his rules for public borrowing".

British Chambers of Commerce warns the Chancellor not to be "profligate" with personal taxes and says:

"we support the prudence the Chancellor has consistently advocated".

I hope that the Chancellor is still in listening mode for sensible advice as I should like to proffer my own for a few minutes; and it will be just a few minutes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, having regard to the time that is left.

It is forecast that there will be budget surpluses over the coming two or three years. I accept the IMF's assessment that that is largely a cyclical phenomenon. The article VI assessment describes it as transient in nature, so an important note of caution needs to be sounded when all of us present our shopping lists to the Chancellor.

Another reason why caution is needed is the fact that there are upward pressures on inflation, to which several hon. Members have referred. As I said to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), if the Chancellor makes decisions about public spending or tax cuts that the Monetary Policy Committee judges to be unwarranted, its response will be to tighten monetary policy. Any gains that we feel would arise from that fiscal stimulus might be taken away with an increase in interest rates.

There are many reasons for the Chancellor to continue his famed prudence. However, there is scope for some clever spending, as I shall show in my advice to the Chancellor. To support my first piece of advice, I refer to the report in *The Guardian* on the Chancellor's performance before the Select Committee on the Treasury last week—although not to the point chosen by the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley). I refer to the mention in the report of broad hints from the Chancellor that there might be more money for health and education in the comprehensive spending review next year. I applaud that. I hope that it is true, although my right hon. Friend will realise that any spending increases must be prudent and sustainable.

My second piece of Christmas advice to the Chancellor is to urge him to continue to put as much distance as possible between himself and the ball and chain of the public sector borrowing requirement. Unlike some Conservative Members, I am pleased by the introduction of more realistic measures, such as the net cash requirement, instead of the old and restrictive PSBR—a measure which positively discriminates against proper capital investment in our infrastructure. I hope that the Chancellor continues to make those moves and that eventually he adopts the general Government financial deficit measure which is used elsewhere in Europe.

I am not only making a plea for the use of different accounting; we need different thinking in the public sector, so that it is free to be innovative. There have been some small examples of that: the armed forces have been given some leeway to attract commercial uses for their surplus resources. I have seen that at RAF Stafford, where the RAF has been innovative in trying to make the best use of its storage space, and in using the strong security of its premises.

I applaud such initiatives and hope that there will be more of them. Under the Local Government Act 1999, local authorities have been given a little more freedom to form trading companies and joint ventures.

My final pieces of advice are on education and productivity—two matters to which the Chancellor will be glad to turn his attention, as education is one of the Government's top priorities and the improvement of productivity is one of the Chancellor's favoured aims. I hope that I shall not bore those on the Treasury Bench if I make a plea to end the unfairness in Government education funding for local authorities. The present system of distributing that money is extremely unfair. The Government accept that and a working party is currently studying the matter. The Chancellor has announced that one of the 13 interdepartmental committees will consider local government finance. I hope that there will be some one-off spending that does not disadvantage authorities that feel threatened when authorities such as Staffordshire ask for more money for education. Authorities at the bottom of the spending league table should be brought higher up without affecting those at the top. That will require one-off, ambitious spending from the Treasury.

As I pointed out in a previous debate, we underinvest in our capital infrastructure. We need investment in order to achieve the highest productivity in UK plc. Through the Treasury task force, we have come a long way in improving performance on private finance initiatives—now public-private partnerships—attracting private investment for capital projects. The Chancellor has reversed the long-term decline in public investment in capital projects under the previous Government. He has done a good job. However, if there is capacity for further public spending, it would be excellent to use that money for public projects—capital spending to improve our infrastructure and productivity.

5.49 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): We have had an interesting debate, even if it has been somewhat arcane and specialised at times. It has concentrated on the Government's spending inputs, rather than on the results that have been achieved for the people whom we represent.

Let me begin by telling the story of one of my constituents, who wrote to me recently about her mother, a lifelong member of the Guildford Labour party, who, sadly, died recently of a heart condition which until 1997 would have been diagnosed and treated in time. My constituent and her family feel betrayed by the Government and their health policies, and by Health Ministers.

[Mr. Nick St. Aubyn]

The treatment did not arrive in time because the waiting time for the diagnosis of heart conditions in West Surrey has gone up from three to nine months, and it is now rising to a year. That is the result of a 20 per cent. cut imposed on the hospital service by the health authority as a result of the changes introduced by the Government, who took authority for the budget away from local doctors and gave it to the health authority. That is a classic example of how changes in the way in which that the service is delivered—it is now more bureaucratic and less sensitive—have directly led to the tragic loss of the lives of my constituent's mother and others in my area.

Only last week, the *Daily Mail* reported the case of a 29-year-old man who was in the prime of life. He had a huge amount to offer and an immense number of friends and he was earning his way in the world. The leading heart specialist at the Royal Surrey County hospital told me that he was convinced that that man would have been alive today if the quality of care had remained at the level available in 1997. The specialist had the terrible task of explaining to that man's family that he had not been able to give him the treatment that he knew was needed and that he would have been able to give him in the past.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I will come to the hon. Lady's comments shortly. I have described the result of the Government's policies. Earlier I was told that, somehow, I did not campaign hard enough for my area. I took it as a given that, wherever the Government's new money went, they would at least maintain the standard of care delivered by the previous Government.

When we were in office, we made sure that the areas that we did not represent—the poorer parts of the country—were very adequately funded. For example, over the past seven years of the Conservative Government, the funding per head in Gateshead increased well over the funding per head in Guildford. Since this Government came to power, they have skewed the formula, which already benefited the less well-off parts of the country to the detriment of the areas that Conservative Members represent.

That is the callous political calculation that we have seen and I am determined to expose it in the Adjournment debate that Madam Speaker has kindly granted me on 13 January. I hope that the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) will be present on that occasion, when she will be able to judge in depth the facts of the case. The hon. Lady said that the West Surrey health authority had a deficit in 1997. That is true; there was a small operating deficit—an accounting deficit. The funding needs of West Surrey were met in full by the previous Government. However, that accounting deficit demonstrated that the formula that threw it up was faulty. It showed that the measure of health need in areas such as mine was not adequately taken account of by the formula at that time. This Government's actions have made the position worse.

Conservative Members are concerned not just with the inputs but with the outputs. We are concerned that, despite the extra money that we are told is going into the health service today, the accident and emergency unit at the Royal Surrey County hospital, which serves hundreds of thousands of people in my area, is still under threat of closure after today's announcement.

Mr. Love: Is the hon. Gentleman calling on the Government to spend more on health in the future?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He knows as well as I do that the Government's remit is to spend the money fairly. I am calling for fair treatment for my part of the country and the efficient allocation of that money. We achieved such efficient allocation with the internal market, the loss of which has directly led to some tragic cases.

I shall give Labour Members another example, drawn from the world of education. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) described how other countries, despite spending far more per head of population on education, have failed to deliver better results than we did when we were in power.

As a member of the Education and Employment Select Committee, I go round the world hearing how other countries have been drawn to the excellent example that this country achieved through our introduction of the national curriculum and external inspection, and other innovations such as the grant-maintained school, with which we were able to improve educational performance in this country.

Above all, I point out to Labour Members the example of the further education sector. It is often said that we live in the learning age, which for me began six years ago when the previous Conservative Government liberated further education colleges from the yoke of local education authorities. The colleges found that, standing on their own feet, they could deliver a 30 per cent. productivity improvement over six years. That meant that they were delivering the equivalent of 1 million extra full-time courses a year to adults and children in this country for the same real cost, without any discernible loss of quality.

When the Government say that they have put an end to boom and bust, let them not forget the role of further education colleges since 1993 in meeting the skills gap by educating the equivalent of an extra 1 million full-time students a year. That has made a dramatic impact on our economy, and it is a vital part of the golden legacy that the previous Government bequeathed to the incoming Administration.

I turn now to class sizes, on which I have tabled a question to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, for answer on 20 January. The Government came to power saying that they would cut class sizes in the first three years of full-time education. They put a cost on that programme of £100 million, which many might say was £100 million well spent. What we now learn, however, is that the cost of the programme has risen by more than six times, to £620 million.

As so many who gave evidence to the Select Committee told us, that money could have been spent on the far more urgent matter of teacher supply and the need to raise the quality of our teaching staff. Whatever the class size, the quality of the teacher is the overriding determinant of how well the children learn.

There is another way in which to view the fantastic overspend by the Department for Education and Employment in delivering the class size pledge. We can

ask ourselves what would have been the cost of delivering the pledge if, to reduce class sizes, the Department had decided to purchase those extra places from the independent sector.

We hear a great deal from the Government about public-private partnership and about introducing new players into education, but when it comes to the private sector players who have the most experience of teaching kids, suddenly an iron curtain comes down. An old-fashioned "us and them" attitude pervades the Government, and they want nothing to do with the independent sector.

Nevertheless, we ask what would have been the cost of purchasing the 6,000 places from independent schools throughout the country which would have enabled all pupils in each of the first three years in state schools to be in classes of fewer than 30 pupils. That cost would have been just £10 million a year, or a total of £40 million over four years, as opposed to £620 million. That £40 million is less than half of the amount that the Government originally said they would spend, and less than a tenth of what they will now spend to deliver their class size pledge.

That is a dramatic example of how, if we are to deliver value for money to our constituents, we must measure the outputs and the results of Government measures, not just the money that they pour in. As we have seen time and again, the Government have wasted and misallocated that money at the expense of our constituents' needs.

Liz Blackman: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, no matter how good the teaching, when class sizes reach 44 or 45 pupils, as they did in my constituency, the optimum level at which children learn is capped?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady that one of the side effects of the Government's programme is that, in their first year in office, the number of children in classes of more than 40 doubled—partly as a result of the pressures on teacher supply created by the Government's early years programme, which would have been relieved entirely if they had purchased the extra places from the independent sector. The hon. Lady makes a valuable contribution to the point that I am trying to make, and I am grateful to her for it.

The question of output relates directly to the debate started by my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) on the tax burden. We notice time and again how Ministers shy away from admitting how much the tax burden has increased under this Government. At the same time as delivering worse value for money, they are increasing the tax burden.

Of course we on the Conservative Benches want a lower tax burden, because we believe that lower taxes are an incentive to members of our society to work harder and contribute more. We proved that in the 1980s and 1990s when in office. We also believe that investment is improved in a low-tax economy. It is more carefully allocated and that leads to greater wealth and an expansion of the tax base. A faster-expanding tax base is worth far more in extra revenue in the long run than a higher tax burden. We will always trade a lower tax burden for the resultant faster expanding tax base, and that is why we will deliver better-quality services in health and education in the medium to long term.

Where would the cost of lowering the tax burden fall? Clearly, it should not fall on health and education, as our amendment makes clear. It should fall on other areas of government. It should be achieved by programmes to convince the workshy to get back into work and to reduce the dependency culture. The latter not only saves the Revenue and the taxpayer a great deal but provides a better future for those in the dependency cycle.

Ms Keeble: The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues constantly express a hard-right, Thatcherite view of the tax burden, but it is interesting to note that in 1985—I am sure that he will accept this—the tax burden was only 0.1 per cent. lower than it is now. That was during what he considers to be the heyday of his Government's policy of low taxation. His argument simply does not hold water.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The fact is that tax burden fell throughout the golden years of the 1980s, to which I shall come in a moment if I have time. With the tax burden percentage in the low 30s, we were able to increase public spending at the same time as repaying Government debt and cutting taxes. That was the agenda on which we went to the country in 1987 and on which we won a record third term in office. Those were indeed the golden years of our economy, which this Government are sadly nowhere in sight of repeating.

That leads me to the question of boom and bust. Yes, there was boom and bust in our economy. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] The years of Labour government in the 1970s were almost entirely bust; there was never any boom. At the end of that term in office, there had been no real growth in the economy for a whole Parliament—just massive inflation. In the 1960s, our level of growth was well below that of our competitors in Europe and America, but in the 1980s and 1990s, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester made clear, we achieved a massive increase in output. Yes, there was a price to be paid in restructuring our economy.

Mr. David Taylor: Not in Guildford.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Sadly, there was a price to be paid in a period of high unemployment.

Mr. Taylor: Not in Guildford.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Nevertheless, by the time we left office, nearly all that unemployment—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Member, but the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) should keep silent. I do not want continual sedentary comments.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for reminding the House of its natural courtesies. I hope that I will now be heard more carefully by the hon. Gentleman, as this goes to the heart of the matter.

There will always be an economic cycle, but thanks to the previous Government's supply-side reforms, we can hope that the troughs will be fewer. Whether the peaks are more numerous depends on how much damage has

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

been done by the present Government's reforms, which have increased the burdens on business and will, in the long run, do little to help the performance of the economy.

Mr. Geraint Davies *rose—*

Mr. St. Aubyn: I shall develop the point, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me. The excessive boom that occurred at the very end of the 1980s was not caused by cuts in taxation. The stimulus to the economy from the last Lawson Budget was only £4 billion. The devastating stimulus to the economy came from the withdrawal of capital that people had in their homes. They were spending between £10 billion and £20 billion a year of capital from their homes on current consumption.

Such spending is never sustainable. We learned that lesson. We learned how to control it, and during the previous Parliament there was virtually no equity withdrawal, as it is called, from the housing market. In the year just ending, however, we find that equity withdrawal is on the increase again. The Bank of England's latest figures suggest that there will be almost £5 billion of equity withdrawal this year. Next year we may get perilously close to the boom conditions of the late 1980s. *[Interruption.]*

I should like the Minister to answer a question, if he will pay attention for a moment. If there is an increase— *[Interruption.]* Will the Minister pay attention to the debate for a moment? If there is an increase in equity withdrawal in 2000-01, are the Government going to rely entirely on the actions of the Bank of England to constrain that equity withdrawal, or are they going to change the tax system? I hope that the Minister's officials, at least, picked up that question and will provide an answer before the end of tonight's debate.

The answer to the question will have a critical impact on whether we can sustain a boom without bust through this Parliament—let alone into the early years of the next century. The savings ratio is already collapsing—that much we know. As a result of that, the conditions of the late 1980s may well be around the corner. An imaginative response from Government could sustain growth, but judging by the actions of this Government, who time and again have attacked savings through their tax increases rather than supporting them, I very much doubt whether we are in the hands of people who know which way to push the tiller.

We have heard a great deal of talk about the independence of the Bank of England. As a member of the Standing Committee that considered the Bank of England Bill, I recall we were clear in our view that the Government had neither delivered Bank of England independence nor fulfilled the Maastricht criteria. They have offered the Bank of England pseudo-independence, not real independence.

What is independent and what is long-term about a situation in which the average tenure of any member of the Monetary Policy Committee is only 18 months? Members are appointed on a phased basis for three years, so at any moment their average term of tenure is only 18 months. We need members of any Monetary Policy Committee to have a far longer term of tenure if we are to have a genuinely independent Bank of England. Without that, all the Government's claims are spurious.

Moreover, the exchange rate policy is still very much in the domain of the Government. Within the framework in which the Bank of England has to work, the Government can use their exchange rate policy to oblige the Bank of England to make interest rate cuts or interest rate rises at will. Again, all the levers are there.

Finally, there is the famous section 19 of the Bank of England Act 1998, which allows the Treasury to take back unilaterally, for three-month periods in succession, with barely a reference to the House, the full control of monetary policy. That is not what we understand independence to mean. It is the sort of independence of mind practised by Labour Back Benchers. Sadly, it is only the appearance of independence, never the reality.

I fear that I do not hope for much from the Minister's speech. However, I hope that he has time to make it and that he will consider my points, and the obligation of all hon. Members to support a fair system of public expenditure both for the areas that he and his hon. Friends represent and for those that Conservative Members represent. Let us hope that that may be the ultimate outcome.

I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me as the last Opposition Back Bencher to speak in the House this millennium.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's words, although I thought that he might complete the millennium.

6.10 pm

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) because I, too, would like to make a few comments about education.

Education has been a Government priority from the start. That means an extra £21 billion for education in the next three years. Although Staffordshire has problems with its standard spending assessment—and, as Treasury Ministers are present, I shall take the opportunity to echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) about the need to resolve the problem of unfair funding—I want to speak about my constituency and how capital moneys have brought real benefits to education in Staffordshire, Moorlands.

I shall cite a few examples. A new extension for a small, two-class rural school in Ilam has given teachers necessary space for small group work, which is essential for raising standards. For the first time, teachers will have a staff room, albeit only large enough for three chairs. However, at last they have a place where they can at least have a cup of tea on their own. I am pleased with the Government's commitment to rural schools. They are committed to keeping rural schools open and to increasing standards through the £40 million small schools support fund, which will ensure that small rural schools are no longer considered second class by local education authorities.

Moorside high school in Cellarhead in my constituency has new laboratories and design technology rooms. When I visited the school after the general election in May 1997, I was appalled by the facilities. The laboratories were out of the 1950s; they were not even big enough to take a full class. No self-respecting pupil—girl or boy—would have been encouraged to take up science as a career. That has

now changed, and thus created new opportunities for young people in a subject that is vital both to them and the nation. The headboy and the headgirl at that school are leading the way by taking up medical careers.

Clough Hall high school is in the low-income area of Kidsgrove in Stoke-on-Trent. Led by a visionary head teacher, Mick Readman, the school has won technology school status and, with it, sponsorship from local firms, and a big financial boost from the Government. Those resources have to be shared in partnership with other local schools and the community. The system is not now one of winner take all, as it was under the previous Government.

The community benefits through after-school activities, and a boost to the local economy. A few weeks ago, ICL announced 500 new, permanent, highly skilled e-business jobs at its site in Kidsgrove, down the road from the school. ICL is one of the technology school's sponsors. It is no coincidence that those jobs appeared in Kidsgrove. In previous years, Kidsgrove would not have been the obvious choice for such new jobs. North Staffordshire had a poor record on the number of 16-year-olds who stayed on at school. The skills simply did not exist, and any jobs would have gone to outsiders, who commuted from nearby cities. Now, we can begin to rely on home-grown talent.

As a Government, we are trying to break the cycle of generational unemployment, under-achievement and educational failure. We want to eradicate child poverty, and we are achieving that in many ways, but education is one of the most important. Low educational attainment makes low pay and unemployment more likely. In 1997, people with no qualifications were twice as likely as those with level 2 qualifications and four times as likely as graduates to be unemployed. In the 1990s, people who stayed on at school after 16 had earnings 60 per cent. above those of people who left at 16. That gap has grown from 40 per cent. in the 1970s, which is why I am such an enthusiastic supporter of the investment in learning and skills councils. They will be responsible for all post-16 training and education. For the first time, we shall have a funding system that responds to the needs of learners rather than to institutions.

The hon. Member for Guildford mentioned the productivity rise in further education colleges, but what was the cost of achieving that? There is no support for students, and lecturers are parachuted in to teach their courses and leave. They are part-time, and have no real connection with their students. They cannot support them even though they are frequently the people who were failed by the school system under the previous Government. I am pleased that the learning and skills councils will look after those pupils who did not excel at school and were abandoned by the Conservatives. Many people did not have a good experience of school, but we need to develop the skills of all our population. We must have a knowledge-based economy in which we can rely on all our human capital and not only the small, highly qualified elite, with the rest left to their fate.

Have the Opposition learned anything from those developments in education? I fear not. They still cling to their competitive education model. They do not want co-operation between schools. They do not believe that schools can spread excellence, even though that is what we have seen with our beacon schools. They argue about class sizes but, when they were in power, they considered them to be irrelevant to raising standards even though many Conservative Members bought smaller class sizes for their own children through the private sector. We are the Government of economic opportunity for all, but theirs is still the party of the privileged few.

6.17 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): The background to the debate can be, and has been during the debate, described in two different ways. The Government's view consists of a miraculous papier-mâché mixed metaphor in which, by getting out of spending silos and conducting cross-cutting reviews to join up government, all is suddenly for the best in the best of all possible worlds and all economic cycles heretofore known to man disappear in the face of permanent prosperity, which has replaced a disastrous economic legacy.

The other picture is one that many of my hon. Friends—most recently my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn)—have painted, and I think that it approximates the truth more closely: the Government were lucky enough to inherit what has been described as a golden economic legacy but is in truth a fundamentally sound structure of an economy that has proved sounder and stronger than many of us expected. I think that my hon. Friends would agree with that. Since then, it certainly has to be admitted that there have been, in comparison with those of many previous Labour Governments, some good moves and sensible and prudent efforts. At the same time, however, worrying trends have emerged.

My hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and for Guildford mentioned some of those trends. For example, in the balance of trade, there is a £19 billion deficit in goods, even in the first three quarters of this year, and a £10 billion deficit in goods and services in the same period. There are many other worrying trends such as asset price overheating and perhaps the beginning of serious worries about competitiveness and savings. Those are the two background pictures: one, alas, is broadly false; the other is true.

In an immensely perceptive speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell)—who, alas, cannot be present now—said that what is remarkable about this debate is the ability of the House of Commons to debate tax and spending without having to debate many of the matters that had to be debated during the 1970s and 1980s, and, indeed, during much of the 1990s. It is much to the credit of the Labour party that, to all intents and purposes, it has abandoned the ludicrous naivety of socialist command economies, and has made some progress. At least we can now have a rational debate about tax and spending, and that gives us, as a democracy, much to be grateful for.

What has come out of the debate about tax and spending, against the economic background that I have sketched? First, as I think the Government in all but name admit, there has been a persistent and considerable increase in tax—an increase by stealth. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), who is a member of the Select Committee, told us of the 19 occasions on which he had tried to get the Chancellor of the Exchequer to admit the fact openly. I must warn my hon. Friend that, even if he makes the same point 190 or even 1,900 times, the Chancellor will never quite admit it. He cannot admit it, because the Prime Minister

[Mr. Oliver Letwin]

said that it would never happen, and it is well known in Labour party circles that when the Prime Minister has said that something will not happen, it cannot and must not happen. Consequently, the official Labour doctrine will be, and will go on being, that this has not happened; but, of course, no one will believe it, any more than they believe it now.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham made clear, we are dealing with something that defies any attempt at definitional dexterity. The fact is that, whatever definitions are used, tax has risen, and will have risen between one end of the current Parliament and the other. More important, perhaps—this may answer some of the points made by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), the Liberal Democrats' spokesman—our tax burden is not only higher than those of Ireland, Spain and Portugal, but, much more worryingly, much higher than those of the United States, Japan and Australia.

We shall have to compete increasingly with those countries given the existence of a new, open economy, in which people—human capital—will be the main commodity that we seek to attract and retain. When business is mobile, because it is knowledge based and hence people based, no one will be able to retain it in this country if they cannot provide a low-tax and low-regulation environment. If the Government do not believe that now, they will come to believe it when they discover, as all Governments do, that they have not actually abolished the economic cycle. They will come up against the problem that the fundamentals have been corroded by higher taxes, and they will find that we are not as competitive as they had hoped that we would be.

Another remarkable development is taking place. Given a vast increase in taxation—£40 million, according to the Government's arithmetic—we might have expected a huge accumulation of surplus; but, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, quite a modest amount of deficit reduction is going on. Indeed, in November—bizarrely, for reasons that I suspect puzzle the Chief Secretary as much as they puzzle me—there was a current budget deficit of about £2.9 billion.

We are talking about small differences between large numbers. They come and they go. However, the fact is that a fairly tight position is developing in comparison with what we would expect, with a huge fiscal drag and a movement towards trend rate of growth.

What is the cause of this bizarre phenomenon? Why have the Government been able—why, indeed, have they been able to demonstrate their ability so successfully—to raise taxes by stealth, without being able to repay vast amounts of national debt? Certainly, the reason is not spending on health or education. Let me put a nail in the coffin of a misleading statement that is frequently made in many places, not least—inadvertently, we hope—by some Labour Members.

We unequivocally support the increases in health and education spending. There is every reason for us to support those increases, which broadly parallel the increases that we introduced year after year. On the Chancellor's own plans, health spending will be increased by £9 billion a year—only £9 billion—between 1998–99 and 2001–02. That is just over, if over, the level of health inflation.

Many of the cases that my hon. Friends the Members for Guildford and for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) and other hon. Members mentioned of structural deficiencies in delivery in the health service—the notorious waiting lists, and waiting lists for waiting lists—and of rising class sizes in many parts of education are due to the fact that the increase in spending is not that aggravated. We support the increase. It can be supported, and it could have been supported without that major tax increase. There is, therefore, quite another explanation.

Shona McIsaac: If the hon. Gentleman broadly supports the extra health spending, could he possibly explain why the shadow Chancellor described it as reckless?

Mr. Letwin: I really do not think that the hon. Lady will much advance debate by mis-attributing statements. My right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has clearly described the totality of spending as reckless—and, in a moment, I shall explain precisely why. I do not think that political debate should be conducted by pretending that people have said something that they have not said, as that will get no one anywhere.

My right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor said:

"I said it last year and I say it again today. We support increases in health and education spending."—[*Official Report*, 9 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 893.]

What he thought was reckless, what I think is reckless, and what I rather think that the Prime Minister must think is reckless is the vast growth in social security spending, which is where the money has gone.

This brilliant Government came to power telling us—I do not quote some minor guru, but a person called the Prime Minister—that

"By the end of a five-year term of a Labour Government: I vow that we will have reduced the proportion"—

of national income that—

"we spend on the welfare bills of social failure . . . This is my covenant with the British people. Judge me upon it. The buck stops with me."

As if that was not enough, on 7 October 1996, the Prime Minister told *Newsweek*:

"Our priorities should be to re-order public spending so that we're spending less on welfare and more on areas like education."

If that is the Prime Ministers' covenant, and if we are to judge him on it, he is to be judged a massive failure. Even stripping away the hype of any cumulative sums, between 1998–99 and 2001–02, there will have been an annual increase in social security spending of £15 billion, which is roughly three quarters as much as health and education spending together.

That has happened for the simple reason—which Ministers, if they are honest with themselves, perfectly well know—that the Government started with a brilliant, very sincere and profound man as Minister for Welfare Reform, and that he hopelessly failed to persuade the Chancellor of the Exchequer to let him do any of the things that he intended to do; and that the Government

have utterly failed to attack the systemic problems in our social security budget. Ministers—and, alas, we as a country—will live to regret that.

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is suggesting that the increased tax burden as a percentage of GDP has funded increased expenditure. However, the figures suggest that that is not true. In 1997–98, general government expenditure as a percentage of GDP was 39.1; in 1999–2000, it is 39.2. Therefore, the proceeds from any increase in tax burden has been spent on deficit reduction.

Mr. Letwin: Alas, no. As I was trying to explain, the extent of current fiscal laxity is demonstrated by the fact that—although the hon. Gentleman was quite right to say that there has been a minor reduction in the deficit and some money has been put away—in the economic cycle in those three years, as the economy has come out of recession and into growth, very little of the surplus has been used where it should have been used—to reduce debt—and a great and growing part of it is being used on social security expenditure. Moreover, that spending creates a ratchet.

If the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton ever found himself—of course, he will not—as Chief Secretary or Chancellor or in a similar office and thought that he could enter a period in which we approach the trend growth rate with current levels of debt repayment and ballooning social security payments and come out the other end—when the cycle hits him, and we move back into recession—without those spending commitments hitting him on the head, he would find himself sorely disillusioned, as many hon. Members in the Chamber who have been in those offices will very well know.

The situation is worse than I have so far described. It is not merely that we have the oddity of a great increase in tax, very little debt repayment and a great increase in social security spending—storing up trouble for the future. We face also a severe lack of transparency in the accounts and open government. That was what my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) went on about, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester and for Bury St. Edmunds.

We have the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, which misses most of the major assets and liabilities. We have a refusal by the Government to accept the establishment of a national accounts commission that would set proper definitions. We have fiddled figures on the reclassification of the working families tax credit and a series of other things. The Red Book has reached a level of incomprehensibility that transcends even the miraculous mixed metaphors of which this Government are otherwise capable.

That is the Government's method of disguising from themselves the very deficiency to which I have pointed. The accounts are not bringing out—as the Treasury must, by now, have lost sight of their own accounts—the real truth, which is that there is no proper tackling of the systemic problem in social security. Until there is, the very structural deficiencies that I have outlined will continue.

The situation is worse than that. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I am glad that there is an intake of breath by Labour Members. The truth is that the Government have presided over the most astonishing recreation of a growth in Government waste. I do not have to rely on fiddled figures or speculation—I can look at the Government's own publication. That document is the only one of the Government's productions that is to be commended. For some reason, Mr. Balls and the others in the Treasury who specialise in spinning these documents have failed to attend to it. Unlike the others, it contains tables that one can understand, and no one has yet managed to manipulate them.

The document shows total gross expenditure on civil departments' running costs. The remarkable thing is that, between 1993 and fiscal year 1997–98, the previous Government managed to contain those costs very well—to within about £100 million across the five years. The figures started and ended at £13 billion. The Government have so managed their own public affairs that they will increase the amount from £13.2 billion at the start to £14.7 billion, a rise of £1.5 billion across the period. What a miraculous achievement for a Government whose priorities are education, education, education, or, according to taste, trying to deal with education and health, or, according to taste, trying to reduce the public sector deficit. Not only have they spent money on social security, they have wasted it wholesale on administration.

That is why my right hon. and hon. Friends spent so long unearthing the £410 million of particular items of waste. However, that is just the beginning of the story. No one could claim that the Conservatives had eliminated all waste from public sector administration when we left government. However, this Government have added to it when it needs to be reduced dramatically.

We have a background of a relatively poorly performing economy—worse than most of our competitors—despite the inherent strengths. We have low growth in comparison with many of our competitors, against the background of a strong economic system—a golden economic legacy indeed—which the Labour party inherited. That is being corroded by high taxes and regulation to fund an explosion in social security payments which the Government are doing their best to hide from themselves and the rest of us through opaque accounting. It amounts to the Government storing up a mass of trouble for the future.

As competitiveness declines, as the IOUs mount, as the Government discover, to their horror, that all their blissful metaphor will not save them from the cycle that everyone else in the world always faces—and that they and the country, in due course, will face—they will find that the IOUs are called in.

I know why none of this worries the Chancellor. The reason is set out in a lapidary phrase that I would like Labour Front Benchers to attend to. A certain person said:

> "In every pore and sinew Labour has shown its basic instinct to tax and tax again."

Who said that? Yes, indeed, that was the new Labour Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward). I wish the Government joy of him.

6.35 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): We have had an interesting debate. I enjoyed the speech made by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin).

[Mr. Stephen Timms]

Our vision for the economy rests on the new foundation that we have built: the new platform of stability in our economy that is almost unprecedented in our history. That stability is all the more important and impressive given the state of the economy two and a half years ago and the massive deficit that was then a feature of it. The challenge now is to lock in that new stability for good so that we can build on it for the long term; and that is what we are determined to do.

That is the basis on which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was able to set out last month, in his pre-Budget report, the Government's new ambitions for the coming decade: that we should make substantial progress in catching up on productivity with our major competitors after decades of slipping behind under the previous Government; that we should have a higher proportion of people in work than ever before—we already have the highest absolute number ever in work, which is a remarkable achievement, but our aim is for the highest proportion ever; that the number of children in poverty should be halved in the next decade, on the way to the ambition set by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister of the abolition of child poverty within two decades; and that, for the first time, over half our school leavers should go on to study for a degree.

All those targets are achievable if we can lock in our new-found stability and build on it for the long term, as we are determined that we should. That determination underpins our programme and our goal of providing employment opportunity for all and a new hope for the future in a fair society, in which all the people have the chance to develop to their full potential and no one is left out.

That applies not only to people in Britain. Thanks to my right hon. Friend's historic announcement last week, there is new hope for people in the poorest countries in the world. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) in commending the Churches, the charities and Jubilee 2000 for the way in which they have pursued their campaign.

The Tories made the classic error time and again over their 18 years in government of allowing short-term political considerations to dictate economic decision making, with Britain then paying the price. Borrowing in 1997 was still high, with the burden of public debt rising steeply and public investment scandalously neglected. The old familiar cycle of boom and bust reared its ugly head once again. What a contrast there is today—the public finances are back under control; public sector net borrowing has been cut by £30 billion in our first two years; and, unlike in the previous cycle, inflationary pressures have been contained and interest rates peaked lower and fell much faster after the peak. As has been said, our peak was the Tories' trough in inflation.

Last month, as well as our new ambitions, the pre-Budget report gave new projections for the economy and the public finances. Current surpluses totalling £58.5 billion are expected over the next five years, compared with a deficit over the previous economic cycle of £149 billion. Net borrowing is now estimated to be in surplus by £3.5 billion, with total net borrowing over the next five years lower than in any single year in the previous Parliament.

We are on track to meet our tough fiscal rules over the cycle, while at the same time investing an additional £40 billion in health and education over the next three years, plus the extra resources for schools, hospitals and safer communities announced in the Budget and the pre-Budget report.

We have been able to deliver all that as a result of our new macro-economic framework, with a new monetary policy framework giving the Bank of England responsibility for setting interest rates in the best long-term interests of the economy to meet the Government's symmetric inflation target, as commended by the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie). Giving the Bank of England responsibility for interest rates was opposed by the Conservative party, but a lot of hints were dropped in this debate. The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) told us that the Opposition had set up a committee, which is a ruse to minimise the embarrassment caused by their change in policy. Indeed, several Conservative Members—such as the hon. Members for Chichester and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton)—have already declared that they support our policy.

We need to remember what the Opposition said at the time of the change to independence, and more recently. The Leader of the Opposition said in October last year that the Government had given up control of interest rates when they should have kept hold of them. The shadow Chancellor said at the same time that the Conservatives would not have given up control of interest rates in the first place. However, the Tories may be about to have a major change of heart and support at last the Government's policy on the monetary policy framework, and we would welcome that.

I was interested in the evidence given by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)—the former Chancellor—to the Lords Select Committee on the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England. He said that he was in favour of independence for central banks and even said:

> "I have always been in favour in principle of an independent central bank and I would have pressed it further if I thought there was the slightest chance of persuading my colleagues in the last Government . . . that we should do that."

If the Opposition have now changed their mind, we would welcome that.

Mr. Tyrie: A few facts are needed. When the idea of independence for the Bank of England first came to public notice in 1989, after Nigel Lawson's resignation, the Labour Opposition vigorously opposed it and continued to do so up to the last general election. Even during the election, the Labour party said that some time would need to elapse before it would introduce the policy. The Government then had their own Damascene conversion. Why?

Mr. Timms: I think that the hon. Gentleman is supporting what the Government have done, albeit in a roundabout way. We made it clear that we would take the steps necessary to achieve stability in the economy. We have done so with spectacular success. I welcome the belated support of Opposition Members and we hope that it will be formalised before too long.

The second element is a new public spending framework that will allow for long-term planning, remove the old Tory bias against investment, and focus on efficiency and

outputs. We have heard much in this debate about the problems with investment in public services from which we suffered so much in the 18 years of Tory Government. The third element is a new fiscal policy framework with the five principles of transparency, efficiency, stability, responsibility and fairness, underpinned by the golden rule and the sustainable investment rule. Those rules will ensure that borrowing stays under firm control and require current taxpayers to pay for current spending. A stable and prudent debt ratio will ensure that fiscal policy is run responsibly and does not threaten the stability of the economy or impose an undue burden on future generations.

Mr. Letwin: The Financial Secretary mentioned the golden rule, but the Chief Secretary was unable to answer questions about what exactly it is, how long the cycle is, where we are in the cycle and when it will end.

Mr. Timms: The golden rule has been repeatedly published and I shall read it to the hon. Gentleman when I find it. It is widely supported as a big step forward. The hon. Member for Chichester said that no one attached any benefit to it, but that is wrong. As the pre-Budget report makes clear, the golden rule states—word for word—that

"over the economic cycle, the Government will borrow only to invest and not to fund current spending".

That is the basis on which we are managing the economy and it is the right basis on which to manage the Government's finances. I hope that the Opposition will also change their position on that policy and support the changes we have made.

We are determined to go on making decisions for the long term. Tory short-termism brought instability to companies and caused uncertainty for taxpayers. Instead, this Government are creating a platform for economic stability that is the precondition for long-term economic success.

However, there is no room for the complacency of which we were accused earlier by a couple of Conservative Members. We remain alive to the risks involved in public finance. For that reason, we will not repeat the mistakes of the late 1980s and relax our grip in the way that I thought that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) was suggesting. We want to lock in economic stability and ensure that it endures for the long term.

The fiscal policy framework is being strengthened by our new way of planning and controlling public expenditure, which started with the comprehensive spending review last year. Departments now have firm, multi-year spending limits to prioritise resources and plan ahead. In that way, a stable foundation is provided for public services that they have never enjoyed in the past.

The new control regime allows underspends to be carried forward and spent on Government priorities, rather than forcing Departments to waste public money on the pointless end-of-year spending binges that characterised the Tory years. The clear distinction between capital spending and current spending ensures that worthwhile capital investment is not squeezed out by short-term pressures, as has happened in the past.

Our first spending review last year committed an additional £40 billion for improvements in health and education provision over three years—and it is supported, in an important U-turn, by the Tory amendment under consideration today. I welcome that change of heart, although the hon. Member for Chichester spoke against the increase in spending. Perhaps he had not had the chance to read the amendment.

It is also important to recall what Conservative Members said when the spending increases were announced. The Leader of the Opposition said that the Government had been "reckless" with spending when they should have been prudent, and the shadow Chancellor called the commitments "extremely irresponsible" and "reckless". I am therefore delighted that the Tory amendment supports the increases in health and education spending. That is an investment for the future, and it reflects our priorities—to build a modern Britain and a decent society, characterised by fairness and opportunity for all.

The spending review also announced a doubling of net investment in the public sector. That is especially welcome to a number of Labour Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford, for Luton, South (Ms Moran), and for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard). In their excellent contributions, they set out how they wanted more public investment in public services. The rise in net investment over this Parliament of 0.5 per cent. of gross domestic product compares with the fall of 1.5 per cent. over the previous Parliament that caused so many of the problems that we heard about in the debate. Gross investment will total nearly £30 billion a year by 2001-02.

Mr. Letwin: Does the Financial Secretary accept that much of the investment that he describes will be achieved through the private finance initiative, which the Chief Secretary lauded earlier? Does he also accept that the Government are sorely deficient in not accounting for the liabilities piling up under the private finance initiative?

Mr. Timms: Unlike the previous Government, this Government are making private finance work. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that so many deals are now being done, and I shall set out the scale of those deals in a moment. I support the basis on which that initiative is being taken forward.

There is no doubt that the Government have solved the problems inherent in the application of private finance to public investment in a way that the previous Government conspicuously failed to achieve. We are providing the money to go with our commitments; that is putting in much-needed new resources for the fabric of our country. An extra £5 billion has come from private finance initiative deals since the election, and there will be £11 billion worth of deals over the next three years.

Prudence with a purpose is replacing the past imprudence without a purpose. It is spending with attitude. Our ambition is nothing less than for our services to be the envy of the world. To help our drive to improve performance, we have a range of new levers—league tables, inspections, targets, sanctions and rewards—to ensure that spending is investment in exchange for modernised services.

I want to respond to a number of the detailed points made in the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) welcomed the way in which the real-terms increases in tobacco duty have been linked to health service spending. He made some

[Mr. Timms]

interesting points about the way in which the health service should be funded in the future. I think that he, along with many others who have spoken in the debate, will welcome the substantial additional allocations for health authorities around the country announced today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) pointed out the stark contrast between the economic failure of the past and the dramatic improvements of the past two and a half years. He illustrated that by referring to the changes in schools in his constituency—the better buildings, the repairs, the fact that there were more computers, smaller classes and new classrooms. All those improvements have been widely welcomed.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton had an interesting debate with the right hon. Member for Charnwood about tax competition. He was right to attack the Tory tax guarantee. It is surprising that in a debate when much was said about the burden of tax, Conservative Members said strikingly little about the Tory tax guarantee. Many of us would like to know rather more about that, or whether they share the views now expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) about that guarantee. [HON. MEMBERS: "Who?"]

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton was touchingly naive about his party's influence on Government policy, although he made some interesting observations. We are not going to spend money before we have it—that is exactly the mistake that was made by the previous Government. They came up with optimistic views about future growth, as the hon. Gentleman invited us to do, and the result was boom and bust. We are not going down that road again.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Could the Minister kindly tell us what is the cycle to which the golden rule applies? Where do the Government assess our present position to be in the economic cycle? Surely they do not believe that the economic cycle has disappeared.

Mr. Timms: We are at a point in the cycle where growth is increasing. It was only at the last Budget that Conservative Members informed us that we were about to head into a deep recession, but they were wrong. Every forecast that they have made has been wrong. They will not be trusted on the economy again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) talked about the threats under the previous Government to her local hospital and contrasted that with improvements in her area today. Her area, like every other, benefits from the huge investment programme in the health service—the biggest hospital building programme ever in the NHS. My hon. Friend also spoke about improvements for pensioners and the contrast with the way in which the previous Government treated them.

The hon. Member for Chichester helpfully acknowledged that mistakes were made by the previous Government. They certainly were. He was right to praise the national health service as a remarkable institution. We will safeguard it and work to keep it up to date and improve it. I was surprised by the hon. Gentleman's attack on literacy and numeracy hours, because they have been hugely effective in raising primary school standards. He seemed more concerned about stability in the chapter headings in the Red Book than about economic stability, but that is one of our central concerns.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South made telling points about the need for investment in housing. She was right to draw attention to the dilapidation in Britain's fabric, and we are turning attention to it. We need new applications of the PFI, and housing policy will be addressed by a forthcoming Green Paper. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford made a characteristically thoughtful and succinct speech. The whole House enjoyed it and Conservative Members were right to pay tribute to him. He made telling remarks about the paucity of investment in public infrastructure in the past. He explained how fiscal rules and the new Government Resources and Accounts Bill will help. Public-private partnerships are needed to achieve change on the scale that we need. I agree with him on the importance of maintaining a vested interest in public assets.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham was right to say that the economy is healthy. I assure him that there is no complacency on our part about the future. He was also right to call for responsibility on pay rises. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford drew attention to the way in which the Government have, in a very short time, turned a large deficit into a surplus. He was right to warn against complacency, and I note what he had to say about the public sector borrowing requirement and its alternative definitions. He will welcome removal of the bias in the system against capital investment.

I was sorry to hear the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) express such a low opinion of the quality of care in his local hospital. I used always to be both intrigued and puzzled by the unique way in which health service funding arrangements applied to health authorities in Surrey under the previous Government. If he gave those arrangements some close attention, he would find that it would repay his efforts.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Timms: No.

My hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) discussed the impressive achievements of her local schools and made an interesting point about the link between ICL and the local technical school of excellence. She told us how that link was feeding into investment in new jobs in her area.

Two and a half years ago, the Government were elected on a crescendo of hope and optimism unprecedented for a generation. The remarkable fact is that those hopes burn even brighter tonight than they did when we were elected. Not only have those hopes not been dashed as the honeymoon came abruptly to an end—as has happened so often over the past 20 years—but they are even stronger than they were when we began. Two and a half years have passed, but, as we have discovered during only the past week, new constituencies are swinging round to support the Government for the first time. The reason for that is that the Government have delivered.

As the millennium draws to a close for the House of Commons tonight, a new faith is abroad in politics—a new conviction that the old cynicism was not necessary

and that we can change things for the better in our nation and in our time. Our ambitions, which all our communities share, are for enterprise and fairness and for a decent and modern Britain. Our new ambitions are that Britain should catch up with our competitors, that child poverty should be brought to an end, that school leavers should study for degrees and that we should have full employment. Those ambitions are shared across the nation. They are not hopeless pipe dreams, but are backed by programmes that will deliver them. As the old millennium draws to a close, we shall deliver a vision of jubilee, of the cancellation of debt and of the dawn of new hope in a new millennium for the poorest people in the world. The Government lead by example.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move*, That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 125, Noes 306.

Division No. 23] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gray, James
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Jacqui Lait and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George

Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the action taken by this Government to build a platform of stability for the British economy, in contrast to the boom and bust of the past; welcomes the new monetary policy framework put in place by this Government, which is delivering stability and steady growth; notes that the Conservative Party opposes Bank of England independence; welcomes the new public spending framework which is delivering an additional £40 billion for health and education; notes that the Conservative Party is opposed to this extra investment; welcomes the fact that this Government is doubling public sector net investment after so many years of neglect; welcomes this Government's programme of reform in the public services and thanks public and voluntary sector workers for their contribution to delivering strong public services for all.

GOVERNMENT RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTS BILL

Motion made, and Question put,

That, during the proceedings on the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Standing Committee A shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.—[*Mr. Robert Ainsworth.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

Mortgage Debt Recovery

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), will those Members who are not staying to listen to the debate exit quickly and quietly with our best wishes for Christmas?

7.14 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a great privilege to be here with you and my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary for this, the last debate of the millennium in this great Chamber of ours in the mother of Parliaments, and to discuss an issue of such significance to thousands of households throughout the land.

Colleagues and others will be aware that between 1989 and 1993, during the times of boom-and-bust economic turbulence, more than 250,000 homes were repossessed. In 1991 alone, some 75,000 homes were repossessed. Since then financial stability in the marketplace, which is due partly to the Bank of England's independence and partly to prudent housekeeping, has enabled the housing market largely to recover, and it is in good shape.

That recovery, however, hides the fact that many thousands of people who have already faced a repossession in the past now face the haunting prospect of further debt recovery, up to 12 years after their home was repossessed. The simple reason for that is that when their home was repossessed, many of them had negative equity, so the proceeds from the sale did not recover their liability.

Householders and their families face the devastation, many years after their home was repossessed, of a bill suddenly arriving at their new home, demanding huge sums that have been compounded by interest in the intervening period. They face the prospect of being unable to negotiate realistic repayment arrangements.

I pay tribute to the citizens advice bureaux, which in recent years have been inundated with such problems. They have issued a report called "The Long Shadow", and their clients, like many of the people whom my colleagues and I have met in our surgeries, have low-paid work or are on benefits and have no savings. They may have new partners and are trying to start a new life in difficult circumstances. They might have children from their previous relationship or a new relationship, and they are trying to rebuild their lives when they are suddenly faced with the prospect of paying out thousands of pounds and being hurtled into family disunity and long-term poverty, just when they thought that they had scraped their way out of severe difficulties.

This debate is about changing the ground rules for initiating outstanding debt recovery to reduce the limit for starting such action from 12 years to six years, which would certainly help thousands of people in future. People who have been through repossession want to know that after several years they will be able to move on and rebuild their lives without the fear of being haunted by a debt of unknown quantity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) has also been fighting hard on this issue, particularly with the Nationwide building society. I am pleased that the Halifax and the Nationwide have now decided to adopt a policy that they will not initiate new debt proceedings after six years. The Council of Mortgage Lenders is consulting its members about the possibility of establishing a voluntary code on that. That is welcome, but the households concerned would like all lenders to be consistent so that everybody knows their position. Clearly, under a voluntary agreement some mortgage lenders will enforce their rights up to 12 years down the line.

There are several good reasons for reform. First, there is enormous uncertainty after a recent Court of Appeal ruling. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary will know that the current law is enshrined in the Limitation Act 1980, which says that in most cases where there is a simple contract, there is a six-year limitation period in which people have to take action to recover debt. That would apply, for example, to the Inland Revenue. In the special case of a mortgage, however, a 12-year limit applies.

In the Court of Appeal case to which I referred, it was said that it was seriously arguable that if a mortgage debt was incurred and repossession of the house took place, the surplus debt became a simple contract after repossession and the six-year rule should apply. There is much uncertainty due to that judgment, because it leaves in the hands of the judge whether it is "seriously arguable" that the repossession of the house has made the debt a simple contract. In most cases, it is assumed that the 12-year rule applies. That is a reason to iron out the uncertainty.

Many of the people who have suffered the awful trauma of repossession were badly advised in the first place. They were led to believe—in fact, they were told—that once they handed in their keys and repossession occurred, that would be the end of the matter. Indeed, seeing many institutions failing actively to pursue the debt after the event led them to believe that everything was all right. They therefore rebuilt their lives on what turned out to be a false premise.

After paying out insurance to the lenders, insurance companies have the right to pursue the borrower but chose in many instances not to do so. That also gave a false sense of security to people who had had their homes snatched from them in difficult times, were trying to rebuild their lives and had thought that there was an end to their problems.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that many people who had mortgage guarantee policies thought that they were the ones who were guaranteed and did not realise that the policy actually guaranteed the lender?

Mr. Davies: Yes, that is precisely so. In one way or another, an enormous number of people have been inadvertently or directly misled. That is part of the complexity of the tragedy for so many families and one of the reasons why, as the issue becomes bigger and bigger and lenders and insurers are changing their behaviour, choosing years after the event to pursue the debt, citizens advice bureaux are spending a quarter of their advice time dealing with such cases. I shall quickly cite a couple of cases.

A single parent had a £55,000 mortgage in 1990, but handed in her keys because she could not pay her instalments. The property was sold for £38,000—

[Mr. Davies]

a shortfall of £17,000—but in 1999, she received a bill for £44,000 as a result of interest and other administrative charges. That was of course completely devastating for the family and entirely unreasonable.

There have been instances of homes being sold at auction for knock-down prices even though those living in them could prove that they could sell their houses for a greater sum on the property market. One couple had someone to buy their house and achieved a selling price which meant a shortfall of only £1,000 on their mortgage, but the lenders insisted that they would sell it and did so for an £8,000 shortfall. Nine years later, the couple received a bill for that shortfall with interest, which is an absolute disgrace.

As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, the matter relates to the Limitation Act 1980. When the Act was passed, negative equity and repossessions were not so commonplace. Indeed, the Act does not envisage the sort of actions that are being taken in the marketplace years after such awful trauma. Therefore, it is time to take stock and to consider what should be done.

It is very much my view and that of the citizens advice bureaux—as well, clearly, as that of the Halifax and Nationwide—that a six-year time limit for initiating debt recovery, which would be in line with other debts, would be much more suitable. I know that the Law Commission is considering the matter, although some five years could elapse before any real help is given to those involved owing to a backlog of Law Commission-inspired Bills. None the less, I obviously very much welcome the review.

As I mentioned, CABs already spend a quarter of their time dealing with such cases. Regrettably, owing to the dynamics in the housing market in various parts of Britain, particularly the north-west of England, people are once again ending up in negative equity. There is the prospect of those people who face repossession losing their house, rebuilding their lives, and, in 2011, facing further action for debt.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. My constituents, Barbie and Patrick Sheargold, were looking forward to a career on the council and working for a housing association. As a result of an assignment of debt, the lives of both are blighted. My hon. Friend's proposal is extremely important for people such as them.

Mr. Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that example. There are countless people throughout the land who are faced with such a trauma. I am sympathetic to their plight, and hope that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary will consider the issue with her usual creativity and sympathy. I know that the Financial Services and Markets Bill is moving forward and there may be various creative ways of confronting the problem.

Time is of the essence. Whenever a year moves on, another pool of people face the 12-year time limit, so the sooner we tackle the issue, the better. What better new year present for thousands of people who may be facing the misery, hardship and trauma of repossession than the knowledge that another trauma will not haunt them in 12 years, and that the limit will be capped at six years?

7.26 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) on securing the last Adjournment debate of the century and the last item of business to be carried out in the House in this millennium. I am somewhat humbled to be the last Minister to speak in a debate in the House of Commons this century, bearing in mind all the momentous occasions that this great debating Chamber has seen over the years.

Looking back to the beginning of the century, I note that when Parliament returned from its Christmas break on 30 January 1900, it was to hear—astonishingly—the 63rd Address of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, who spoke on hostilities in South Africa at the time.

The first Member of Parliament to speak in the House that day was Captain Prettyman, who had been in the Royal Artillery and was the Member of Parliament for Suffolk, Woodbridge between 1895 and 1906. As a military man, his main focus as a mover of the Address was in supporting our troops in South Africa. He also defended the artillery from criticism that their field guns were not as effective as the enemy's. On the home front, which is highly relevant to the debate, Captain Prettyman supported the remodelling of the prevailing Companies Act to stop people being induced to part with their money under false pretences—plus ça change, as they say.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central, I was concerned to read of the cases highlighted in the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux report, "The Long Shadow". Before I deal with the matters to which my hon. Friend referred, it may be helpful if I set them in context.

At the end of 1996—the latest figures available—there were 16 million owner-occupied houses in Britain, some 67 per cent. of the housing stock. That shows the huge strides in prosperity that the UK has enjoyed in the 20th century. At the end of 1998, there were 10.9 million mortgages in place. Of those, only about 230,000 were in arrears, which represents about 2 per cent. of the total, and 35,000 of them had been in arrears for more than 12 months—that is, 0.33 per cent.

Most people pay off their mortgages regularly, with few problems. Nevertheless, there have been concerns about the mortgage market for some time. As part of our manifesto commitment, the Government decided to consider whether there was a case for the regulation of mortgages. The Treasury published a discussion document in July, seeking comments on whether the advice on and selling of mortgage products should be regulated by the Financial Services Authority. A major part of the exercise was to seek evidence to show where consumers were being damaged in the present mortgage market. The Treasury received 200 responses from consumer bodies as well as lenders and regulators. The FSA published its own cost-benefit analysis. The Treasury has set out proposals for charges access terms-standard mortgages and received comments from a wide range of bodies on those proposals.

The Treasury is in the final stages of making a decision on how best to protect consumers; we hope to make an announcement soon. In response to the main mortgage

consultation, NACAB and others highlighted questionable practices by lenders, to do with arrears and repossession procedures while borrowers are still in possession, and chasing repossession debts afterwards.

Regulation—if that is the eventual decision—could not cover the relationship between lenders and borrowers who are in financial difficulties. It would cover only the sales process, including the advice associated with it. Good advice would include consideration of whether the customer could afford the mortgage in the first place, and information about what might happen if he subsequently could not afford it.

Our proposed CAT standards are designed to ensure that lenders deal fairly with borrowers who have only modest arrears. We acknowledge that lenders need to have the means to recover outstanding moneys that are due to them—that is only fair to the majority of borrowers who pay on time. However, it is important that they do so in a reasonable manner without being unduly harsh.

In its report "The Long Shadow", NACAB calls for an amendment to the Limitation Act 1980 to clarify the limit of six years for lenders to start recovery action for mortgage shortfall debt, as my hon. Friend pointed out. The Limitation Act states that, in the case of the principal sum secured by the mortgage, no action may be brought to recover the sum after 12 years have expired. The length of time for other debts is six years.

In the 1997 Court of Appeal case of Hopkinson *v.* Tupper, the court considered that when a mortgagee has repossessed and subsequently sold the property under the terms of his security and is seeking to recover a shortfall, it is arguable that his claim is one in simple contract, whatever the nature of the instrument under which the debt was initially secured. In layman's terms, on sale of the property, any outstanding mortgage debt becomes ordinary debt. The time limits for those recoveries is six years.

Treasury legal advice is that the views expressed by the court do not serve as a legal precedent, which must be followed in later cases. However, I understand that the Law Commission has consulted on civil limitation periods in general. The Government will consider its report and recommendations carefully. Those matters are the responsibility of the Lord Chancellor's Department.

That does not mean that some rules are not in place. The Council of Mortgage Lenders, which represents some 98 per cent. of the mortgage market, has a statement of practice on handling arrears and repossessions. It sets out several principles and practices, which include: possession to be sought only as a last resort when all other attempts to make alternative arrangements have been unsuccessful; and lenders to be under a duty to obtain the best price that is reasonable for the property, but the sale of the property to take place as soon as possible to minimise the accrual of mortgage interest on the account. Following the sale of the property, the borrower remains liable to repay any shortfall between the amount of the outstanding mortgage and the sale price obtained. The lender should notify the borrower as soon as practically possible of the amount of the shortfall.

As a direct response to the NACAB report, the Council of Mortgage Lenders will shortly consult its members on the practical implications of lenders contacting borrowers during the six-year period. That is welcome news; I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome it.

Like my hon. Friend, I was pleased that the Nationwide announced on 16 December that it will place a time limit—on starting the recovery of mortgage debt—of six years from the sale of the mortgaged property. In the light of the CML consultation, I am sure that other lenders will follow suit.

In drawing the debate to a close, I want briefly to take stock for a few moments to mark the historic changes to the role of women in the House. The first woman to be elected to the House was Countess Constance Markievicz, who represented Sinn Fein, in 1918. She did not take her seat, in common with other Sinn Fein Members. The first woman to take her seat was Viscountess Astor, who concluded her maiden speech by saying:

"I am simply trying to speak for hundreds of women and children throughout the country who cannot speak for themselves."—[*Official Report*, 24 February 1920; Vol. 125, c. 1631.]

Mr. Davies: Women and children are seriously affected by the issue that we have been discussing. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is worth reviewing the matter of achieving a sale as soon as possible after repossession? Rather than being effectively and professionally marketed, people's homes are repossessed and sold at auction for a low price, even though those homes could be sold for much more and the future liability could be much less. Something needs to be done to ensure that the liability is minimised.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those remarks, which tie up with the CML's point that it is important that lenders secure the best price that is reasonably obtainable for a property. How a property is sold, and how quickly that is achieved, are indeed relevant. Indeed, under the code arrangements, lenders are under a duty to obtain the best possible price. The subject of the debate is important because it affects us all: our homes are central to our lives and our security.

There has been massive change in this century, both in terms of people's home lives and the representation of women in the House. The House has seen many other changes over that period, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for initiating the debate on such an historic occasion. As we look forward to the new century and the new millennium, I am sure that he, like me, hopes that the House can be at least as instrumental in furthering the many issues that concern hon. Members and the wider public as it was in the past century.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-three minutes to Eight o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 14 December 1999

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Human Organs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Sutcliffe.*]

10 am

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am grateful for this opportunity to participate in a debate on the removal, donation and transplantation of human organs.

The debate follows in the wake of the tragic Alder Hey case in Bristol, in which children's organs were removed, allegedly without their relatives' consent. I should make it perfectly clear at the outset that I do not believe that anybody could condone such behaviour. Whatever the status of the law—whether it remains as it is or is changed—I do not believe that anybody would wish to remove organs from any deceased person if the relatives concerned did not wish that to happen.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I should like to make a little progress and at least introduce the subject before I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The debate follows a previous debate in the House so excellently opened by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). I am delighted to see him in his place today, because few hon. Members know more about the subject than he does. Indeed, before the debate in the House, he proposed a debate at the British Medical Association conference, as a result of which the BMA adopted, for the first time, a policy of calling on the Government to change the general presumption in favour of opting into a system of organ donation.

Mr. Dalyell: Before telling us that we should not condone something, can the hon. Gentleman tell us whether he has talked to the doctors at Alder Hey so as to hear their side of the story?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I have had correspondence with them, but I have not discussed the matter with them personally. However, it must be a general presumption that, where the relatives do not wish organs to be donated, those wishes should be respected at what is a time of great sadness and grieving.

The debate is set against a worldwide background of a shortage of cadaveric organ donors, and waiting lists are lengthening all over the world. They currently stand at some 60,000 in the United States, 13,000 in Europe and 6,000 in the United Kingdom. More tragically still, there are more than 4,000 kidney dialysis patients, 1,000 of whom are under 30, whose quality of life—indeed, life expectancy—could be transformed by a transplant operation. I have to say that most will remain disappointed.

The challenge is to ensure that everyone in society is given the opportunity to think constructively and sensitively about whether they would like to donate their organs in the event of their untimely death, while ensuring that their relatives and dependents are fully aware of their views. Given the enormous benefit that recipients gain, it is surprising that only 26 per cent. of adults in this country have obtained a donor card, and that only 18 per cent admit to carrying one. Yet surveys have shown that, when people are asked about organ donations, 70 per cent. of the population would be willing to donate. Death is something that many of us find hard to contemplate. The removal of our organs after death, at a time when our relatives are grieving, is even more difficult to contemplate.

It is worth recapitulating how the present system operates and the legal framework under which it does so. The Human Tissue Act 1961 stipulates the two circumstances in which organs may be removed—where there has been a specific request to that effect by the deceased person or, in the absence of such a request, if there is no reason to believe that the deceased expressed an objection and the relatives also do not object. That was the point that I was making in my opening remarks when the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) intervened. In other words, the deceased, or his or her relatives, must positively state that they wish to have the organs removed.

There is a legal argument, which will need to be tested in the courts at some stage, as to who is legally in possession of the body. It is usually presumed to be the hospital until the body is claimed by those with a greater claim—namely, the relatives. The problem then arises as to which relatives take precedence in that respect. Irrespective of the law, it would be unacceptable to remove organs unless the relatives were all agreed on that.

In some European countries the presumption is reversed, so that those who positively object will not be considered eligible for organ donation. The Government—including the Minister of State, who is here today—have ruled out that change in presumption on the basis that countries that have it, such as Italy, do not have a higher donation rate. However, I suspect that in the case of Italy that is for other reasons—for example, poor procedure and lack of public awareness. On this occasion, I agree—unusually—with the Deputy Prime Minister, who recently, during Prime Minister's questions, said:

> "Ministers have continually said that we shall consider all suggestions for improving transplant rates, but any proposed measures in that sensitive area will have to command public confidence and support."—[*Official Report,* 30 June 1999; Vol. 334, c. 343.]

That is something around which all hon. Members could unite.

On a positive note, what could be done to improve the present system under the current legislation? The donor card system was introduced in 1971. It is purely voluntary, and my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who will speak in the debate, has some excellent proposals for publicising that. To put it rather brutally, the butchers' offal approach of the tick as to which organs one wishes to donate—eyes, heart, lungs, pancreas and so on— tends to put many people off signing a donor card. I hope that the Minister will, if

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nothing else, consider whether the donor card wording can be altered so that one merely ticks the box if one wishes to donate any organs. I can see no reason why there should be a distinction between different organs. As a start, all Members of Parliament and all those connected with the medical profession should volunteer to carry one. I hope that all Members of Parliament will pledge to do that as soon as possible.

The voluntary consent part of the driving licence is almost unknown to most people. When I first passed my test, far too many years ago to remember, I signed the organ donation part of the licence and put a little note in with it. However, that was a long time ago, and few people now realise that the driving licence contains such a provision. I am sure that the Government could do much more to publicise that avenue to allow people to inform those concerned that they wish to have their organs donated.

The national organ register should be properly updated and overhauled. It should be computerised and made available on the internet, and the Government should be much more proactive in making the contents of the register known. Robert Sells, the professor of transplant surgery at the Royal Liverpool University hospital, recently stated in a British Kidney Patient Association silver lining appeal brochure of December 1999, that in Spain, in 1986, the number of organ donations was drastically improved by introducing into hospital intensive care units a co-ordinator who was directly responsible to the chief executive of each hospital for counselling those who might be prepared to donate their organs. That dramatically increased the number of organ donations from six people per million in the population in 1985 to 31 per million in 1988. As a result, Spain's transplant waiting lists have fallen. Waiting times for liver and heart transplants are considerably shorter, and Spain now exports organs to other European countries. That is a very positive development, which the Minister may wish to consider. Robert Sells said:

"It seems clear beyond doubt to practically every transplant surgeon world wide that the adoption of such a system would produce an immediate increase in organ donation. I believe the effects would be particularly beneficial in this country where there are too few co-ordinators, who generally work within inadequate job descriptions and with inappropriate salaries."

It is arduous work, of course, and, in Spain, co-ordinators work within the system for only three to four years, after which they move on to other specialties in the medical profession. The introduction of properly trained co-ordinators who could counsel relatives at a time of grief and distress and advise on organ donation would be a positive step forward.

I call on the Minister to establish a task force with a cross-departmental remit, which could consider organ donations in the light of the cost to the NHS of, for example, daily dialysis. It could also consider whether the law should be changed. At the moment, the general presumption is that those who wish to donate organs should opt in to the system. That general presumption should be reviewed. As I said, the British Medical Association has, for the first time, changed its policy on the matter. I know that the Minister and his colleagues have said in the House that there would be no advantage in changing the general presumption. I am not sufficiently qualified to judge, but experts should consider the matter in depth.

The third job for the task force would be to consider the issue of public awareness and education. It would have a remit to employ public relations consultants to consider whether a general advertising and publicity splurge would be of benefit. Such a campaign took place in 1995 and 1998 with only limited success, although it was perhaps not planned and conceived as well as it should have been. A campaign to increase awareness of the voluntary systems of donor cards, licence forms and the national organ donation register could have considerable benefit. It would enable people to consider the issue well in advance of an untimely death. The problem with the present system is that, when someone dies, people naturally suffer much distress and grief, and they often make decisions that they later regret. Therefore, if the public were educated well in advance of such events, it would be a great benefit to all concerned.

Life is short. No one knows when a life-threatening emergency condition is likely to occur. Such a condition could occur to any of us tomorrow. I hope that the Minister has listened to my speech, and that a few notches of progress will follow. I pledge to apply for a donor card today. I hope that all Members of Parliament, and everyone connected with the medical profession, will, as a matter of course, carry donor cards, and make it known to their relatives that they have done so.

10.13 am

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): The House is in the debt of the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), for his choice of subject and for his constructive speech.

I should like to begin by putting a question to my hon. Friend the Minister of State. What are the Department of Health's latest figures on the shortage of organs? In this Room last night, Professor Robert Winston was asked about organ shortage, and replied that the American figure was much more accurate than the British one. He put the American figure at 600,000. If we were to divide that according to population, our figure would be 140,000 to 150,000. Would the Department of Health accept such an estimate?

I have a history of interest in this matter. On several occasions in the 1970s I tabled a Bill to allow hospitals to take the organs of anyone other than those who had contracted out through the centre at Bristol. As often happens with Members of Parliament, my interest arose from a case in my constituency—an especially poignant case when I was a new Member of Parliament. It concerned a 23-year-old teacher called Grant Allen, whose parents begged for an organ to save his life. We did not succeed—there was no matching tissue to be had—but I undertook to those people that, as long as I remained a Member of Parliament, I would take an interest in the subject. It is tragic that so many useful organs go into the incinerator.

I believe passionately that decisions on these matters—as the hon. Member for Cotswold mentioned—should not be made at the point of maximum grief. In 1969, I was

parliamentary private secretary in the Department of Health to Richard Crossman when Sir Hector Maclennan, the distinguished doctor and father of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), chaired a report on organ donation. The recommendations of the Maclennan committee were somewhat ambiguous, but opting out was left as an option. With the encouragement of the then chief medical officer, Sir George Godber, and his deputy, Dr. Henry Yellowless, I conducted a survey—which took 42 days—of 1,000 people in my constituency. A Member of Parliament can talk confidentially as a pollster cannot, and I remember the results of the survey very well. Of those 1,000 people, 372 would have agreed to the opting-out scheme, while 316 preferred the voluntary system. A further 108 were passionately against it, on various different grounds. Of those, three state registered nurses separately told me to do something about the common hernia first, but that was 30 years ago. Expectations have risen since then, and people think that they have the right to sophisticated and, as my hon. Friend the Minister knows, extremely expensive operations. Will my hon. Friend consider whether the opting-out scheme should at least be tried? Hospitals would be able to take the organs of anyone other than those who had opted out during their lifetime, after clinical death has been established by two separate doctors, neither of whom is the renal surgeon.

My friend Roy Calne briefed me on the proposals that I put forward 30 years ago. The hon. Member for Cotswold referred to Robert Sells; he had great reservations about my proposal on the ground that it might lessen the number of available organs. I will not hide the fact that there was a considerable difference of opinion among distinguished renal surgeons, and I do not pretend that all the argument is one way. Given a desperate shortage of organs, different expectations, and the greater chance of success, however, the Department of Health should consider the introduction of an opting-out scheme.

Ironically, the flow of organs was lessened by a new piece of legislation—the seatbelt legislation. Thankfully, that has reduced markedly the number of deaths from motor accidents. Therefore, organs, especially those of young people, are not as available as they were before.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in 1997, the French changed the law in favour of an opt-out system?

Mr. Dalyell: Yes, I am. Other countries have done so, and the hon. Gentleman's description of the Spanish scheme deserves a long and detailed answer. The French have succeeded, as has Israel, and with considerable effect. It is ironic that opposition comes from strange places. When I introduced a ten-minute Bill on the matter for a second time, the right hon Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir Edward Heath), the then Prime Minister, stayed to hear the debate, which was most unusual. Afterwards, he said that, although he personally sympathised with my view, I would never persuade Keith Joseph, the then Secretary of State for Social Services. I was a bit vexed, therefore, to discover that the former chief rabbi, the late Sir Immanuel Rehobovits, who passionately opposed the idea, managed to persuade Keith Joseph against it, even though Israel had introduced a successful system. There are a variety of views, but the hon. Gentleman has made an important point.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that it was Sir Keith Joseph who introduced the voluntary donor card system.

Mr. Dalyell: Yes, he introduced that system, but it has proved far less successful than he anticipated because none of us wants to contemplate our own demise. People forget to carry donor cards because they take the view that, if they are to step under the proverbial bus, at least it will not happen this afternoon.

The issue is complicated. A number of those who, in the heat of the moment, refused to donate the organs of loved ones have subsequently said, "If we had thought about the issue, we should of course have liked to help someone else." Many such people take the rather curious view that the organs of a deceased loved one are still alive. The subject provokes strong emotions. On conducting my survey, I discovered great differences in attitudes towards, for example, the kidney and the heart. I vividly recall one woman who told me, "They can take what they like from my husband, but not his heart. The heart is something different—that belongs to me." One might say that that is irrational, and that the heart is only a pump, but such feelings nevertheless remain.

Last night, a fascinating meeting about the question of therapeutic cloning took place in this Hall. Perhaps the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), who was present, intends to discuss it. Professor Lord Winston, who was in attendance, argued that we must consider generating organs for the future. He explained the advantages of transplanting cardiac cells, for example, that could assist bladder transplants, and therapeutic cloning. He called for facilitating directed cell culture and emphasised that, potentially, embryonic cells could be used directly for specific purposes, particularly the improvement of chromosomal disorders. He cited the transplant of neurals, which would help in the treatment of Alzheimer's. Those of us who saw Mohammad Ali on television the other evening will recognise the possibilities of such developments.

The growth and use of tissues and embryonic cells to cope with illnesses such as mitochondrial disorders are complicated issues. Has the Department of Health considered the possible legislative consequences of the remarkable developments at Hammersmith hospital, Imperial college and a number of other centres throughout Britain, not least in Edinburgh and Glasgow, with which I am particularly familiar? In view of the limited time, I close with that question.

10.25 am

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I have one point to which I want briefly to draw the Chamber's attention. To a large extent, I share the views expressed by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), and would countenance an opt-out scheme rather than an

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opt-in scheme. However, having spoken to a number of surgeons, it would appear that relatives refuse organ donations only rarely. As the hon. Gentleman noted, to some extent the supply of potential donors has declined because of improvements in the treatment of road traffic accident victims, a decline in the severity of such injuries, and a reduced number of intracranial vascular ruptures.

However, the use of elective ventilation has helped partially to restore that supply. On behalf of Mr. Curry, who is a constituent of mine, I recently wrote to the Minister on the matter. In 1993, when elective ventilation was in its infancy, pioneering work was undertaken at the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital. With relatives' consent, patients who were close to death were placed on ventilators, enabling their organs to be made available for transplant. Had they been allowed to die, it would not have been possible to recover those organs. Elective ventilation increased the availability of organs at that pioneering centre by 50 per cent. in 1993.

However, elective ventilation was reluctantly abandoned by the Department on the basis of legal opinion. I do not know whether that opinion related to the Human Tissues Act or the presumption in common law that medical treatment must benefit the patient. Irrespective of the consent of relatives, a person who is close to death cannot be placed on a ventilator for someone else's benefit. That is an anomalous situation. We allow minors—children under the age of proper, rational consent—to donate bone marrow for the benefit of others. They are subjected to a medical process that is not exclusively for their own benefit. In other words, the underlying principle is exactly the same as for elective ventilation. If we would not dream of doing without bone marrow transplants, why has the law been used to put an end to elective ventilation?

I urge the Minister to amend the law, so that we can overcome the presumption in common law against elective ventilation and restore what was a promising supply of potential organs for donation.

10.30 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) for introducing the debate, and also to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) for his contributions over many years, and for the help and advice that he has given me. I also want to comment on a provocative and thoughtful—I will not say uncharacteristic—contribution from the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne).

It is important to make it clear that different issues relating to this matter are discussed in the media. First, there are the decisions about the use of tissues that have to be taken at a coroner's post mortem. Under current law, when cause of death needs to be established, there is no opportunity for relatives to say that there should not be a coroner's post mortem and that such tissues that are needed to make a diagnosis should not be removed. I do not think that there is a general call for relatives to be able to veto the actions of a coroner and a pathologist in establishing the cause of death.

There is also the matter, both ethically and in practice, of the retention of organs for research purposes. We deprecate the fact that in at least one hospital it has been common practice after post mortems—whether coroners' post mortems or others—to retain organs for research purposes, or any other purposes, without consent being sought from the surviving relatives of adults, or from the parents of dead children. It is accepted as good medical practice—the only ethical medical practice—to seek that consent. Those research projects should seek ethical consent through a local research ethics committee, which would insist that adequate, informed consent procedures exist for such relatives, as did the committee on which I sat for some years.

As the hon. Member for Cotswold recognised, those situations are different from the issue of organ donation for transplant purposes, which has occupied most of our time in this debate so far. The Human Tissue Act 1961 must at least be considered for significant repair because of the lack of clarity in its wording, and the problems that that causes for people awaiting transplants. I can give the hon. Member for Linlithgow the figures he seeks, as, I am sure, can the Minister. In 1998, 7 per cent. fewer organ transplants were carried out in the United Kingdom than in 1997, and in the same period the waiting list for those requiring organ transplants to save or transform their lives increased by 3 per cent.

The increasing gap between supply and demand appears to be a continuing trend, and figures more recent than those that I quoted show a continuing decline in the number of organ transplants carried out, and an increase in the number of people on the transplant waiting list. The number of people on the waiting list is the tip of the iceberg, compared with the number who would benefit from organ transplantation. Because so few people are likely to have a transplant, relatively few are given the false promise of being placed on a transplant waiting list.

As I said when I introduced a ten-minute Bill on the matter to an empty Government Front Bench—the Minister has assiduously attended discussions on this issue since then—a silent tragedy is taking place. Thousands of people are dying for want of an organ that could save or transform their lives, while many organs are being buried or cremated with their hosts. Many of those hosts, had they thought about the issue and had an opportunity to register their view, would not have objected to their organs being used in the event of their death to save the lives of others. The tragedy of such preventable deaths is a stark one, not only for those of us who have worked in medicine on both sides of the donation and transplantation field, but for those on transplant waiting lists.

One partial solution to the problem would be a shift, after a suitable period of education to obtain broad public consent, to a system of presumed consent. That would give people several opportunities to register the fact that they did not wish to have their organs used, whether through driving licences, tax returns, electoral registration or at post offices. Their views would be respected; they would be registered on a database which would be checked. That would strongly encourage, if not force, people to consider the issue of death before they might wish to do so, especially young people who are often tragically in a position to donate following traumatic injury. They think that they are immortal and do not like to think about death.

Public opinion polls ask whether people prefer the current system, in which they do not have to think about the issue unless choosing to seek a donation card, to one in which they would have to discuss the matter with relatives and register their views. The result of those polls, as the Government will suggest, may well be that people prefer the status quo. Of course people will say that, but we must recognise that there are other interests at stake—those of patients awaiting an organ transplant and their relatives.

The evidence suggests that, if that system were introduced properly and carefully, the supply of organs could be increased. That would be one benefit. A second benefit would be that the wishes of the donor would be paramount, and the tragic situations that arise at the moment would no longer do so. At present, in a large number of cases, no one knows the view of the potential donor; and relatives, at the height of their grief, have to second-guess that view. I can tell the hon. Member for New Forest, West that as a result of surveys—I do not think that this is contentious—we know that, in about a third of such cases, relatives refuse consent when asked. I do not necessarily blame them for that, although we know from Spanish surveys that at least 30 per cent. of them regret that refusal a year later. That is not surprising: I would not trust myself to make those decisions at the start of a grieving period. Therefore, the presumed consent system would not only increase the supply of organs, which would save lives, but give primacy to the views of the donor, which is critical.

Mr. Dalyell: The hon. Gentleman is a doctor, and I am not. Is it not asking rather a lot of doctors, when they have been struggling to save someone, to summon the energy to ask such terrible questions? Those questions would have to be asked within half an hour, otherwise deterioration would set in. I would not blame doctors for not putting those questions to relatives at such a time.

Dr. Harris: The people who have to seek consent—doctors, nurses and transplant co-ordinators—do a valuable job, and it is part of their role. Learning how to achieve consent should be, and in most places is, part of their training. As a doctor, I find it much easier to approach relatives when the views of the deceased are known. In my forecast scenario, one could explain to the relative that their loved one had not opted out of the scheme and might well have discussed the matter with them. In the light of that, one could ask the relative whether they had any subsequent knowledge that the deceased did not want his or her organs to be donated. The deceased person's views would be of primary concern. Only in the event of a fundamental objection from a relative should the presumed consent opt-out system be overruled.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: On the issue of presumed consent, what does the hon. Gentleman think of the idea that solicitors should be encouraged to ask clients of sound mind drawing up a will to include a positive clause stating that they wished to have their organs donated in the event of their death?

Dr. Harris: I support any way of making people think about the matter, but access to a will at such a time is not reasonable, except in a small minority of circumstances. However, if that promotes discussion of people's wishes with their relatives—the filling in of donor cards by the minority of people who carry them often does so—that can only be desirable.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): On this interesting part of the hon. Gentleman's speech, does he have any data to share with the House on the experience of countries with an opt-out system and the relative shortage or otherwise of organs? If he does not have the information, I am sure that the Minister can provide it. One fact to be considered when examining an opt-out system is whether it has worked in other countries.

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman makes a critical point. The BMA has adopted that policy. I would not want the scheme to be introduced if there was not clear evidence that it would increase the supply of organs if introduced in the most effective way, following best practice in Europe, where practice is variable. There should be a Government-sponsored programme of education and research because the worst that could happen would be to have this controversial debate—my postbag shows that it is controversial—with no evidence available. I have examined the Belgium system and there was a clear increase in the number of available organs. Useful controls were Holland, which has a similar culture, and some hospitals in Belgium, which did not change the system, but were subject to the same education process and publicity about the change in the law. Neither experienced the increase in organ donation that the Belgian hospitals which did switch experienced.

In a consensus statement on meeting the organ shortage, the Council of Europe stated:

"Presumed consent laws, when fully accepted, seem to benefit donation".

It went on to refer to a Belgian paper by Dr. Roels, which set out the evidence. Professor Gells, who was cited earlier, was a member of the European transplantation forum, headed by Professor Kennedy. In a paper in *The Lancet* a few years ago it stated why it believed that a presumed consent system could work.

I turn to the existing possibilities for improving the current system which the Government should consider. The donor register is a useful idea, but is unwieldy. People on the register are never taken off, even after they have died. There is no automatic link between certification of death and removal from the register. That cannot be sensible. People may change their names when they marry and for other reasons, but there is no link between the marriage certification system and the donor register.

The Minister's colleagues at the Home Office and the Treasury have been apprised of the situation by the campaign group, Donor 2001, which proposed the use of electoral registration forms for registration on the donor register. In Taunton Deane borough, that produced remarkable results, with an increase in the number of people registering as donors—10,000 new registrations from a total of 44,000 people. That shows that presumed consent is not the only idea in my locker. I pay tribute to Councillor John Meikle, who promoted the scheme. People in Taunton Deane, as well as Donor 2001, are frustrated that the Home Secretary is not as

[Dr. Harris]

enthusiastic about extending the scheme as the Government have been about extending all sorts of schemes with less strong data for the success of the pilot schemes.

Elective ventilation is an interesting idea. As the hon. Member for New Forest, West suggested, under common law treatment should only be given for the benefit of the patient. Another practical problem is the chronic shortage of intensive care beds. Someone might have opted for future elective ventilation, but ventilators or intensive care beds might not be available. Despite my support for presumed consent, I believe that the Government could increase the supply of organ donors at a stroke simply by increasing the resources for, and the number of beds on, intensive care units. There is medical consensus for that. The legal barrier to elective ventilation could be circumvented if the law were changed to allow the existing donor card to offer an opt-in to future elective ventilation. Consent would then be given for that intervention, albeit not for the benefit of the person concerned.

The increasing use of non-beating heart donations for kidney donation needs to be considered. The Government should promulgate a debate on the ethics and practicalities of xenotransplantation before irrational opposition on health grounds and spurious ethical grounds takes over the argument as it took over the argument on genetically modified organisms.

Therapeutic cloning should also be considered. It was disappointing to many scientists and clinicians when the Government rejected the advice of their advisory groups—the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority and the Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification—and set up yet another working party to consider whether research would be useful. The usual way of finding out whether research would be useful is to do that research. A huge amount of work remains to be done on transplantation and donation. The Royal College of Surgeons produced a report, the author of which was my constituent, Professor Sir Peter Morris, on organ transplantation. It suggested that, in addition to donor issues, a series of issues needs to be considered, including the organisation of transplantation services, an increased supply of junior doctors to become transplant surgeons and a national transplant service and strategy to deliver increased efficiency using available organs. I hope that the Minister will respond to that working party and adopt many, if not all, of its recommendations.

I thank the hon. Member for Cotswold once again for introducing the debate.

10.46 am

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on introducing the debate. I saw the title of his intended debate last week and thought that it would provide the opportunity to bring together several different issues, but when I listened to the hon. Gentleman this morning, he suggested a closer connection between the issues than actually exists.

Hon. Members may know that, for several years, I have been involved with the Bristol heart action group, which brings together the relatives of those whose babies died in the tragedy at Bristol royal infirmary. In that connection, I have recently taken an interest in events at Alder Hey hospital, and there is now a connection between the two groups of parents.

The hon. Member for Cotswold said that no one was accusing doctors of deliberately removing organs without the consent of relatives—

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I did not say that. I said that it was not acceptable for any organs to be removed when the consent of the relatives had not been properly given.

Mr. Harvey: I am sorry. I misrepresented the hon. Gentleman and I am grateful to him for correcting me.

It would be too benign an interpretation of what happened at Bristol, Alder Hey and, I suspect, many other places, if not generally, to say that doctors have not removed organs without the consent of relatives. That seems to have happened on an extraordinarily wide scale and has, understandably, caused great alarm. I have not seen any suggestion that the purpose of that removal of organs was in any way to assist with the supply of organs for transplantation. In a macabre way, that would almost have been more acceptable.

The organs were retained principally for research. The Royal College of Pathologists is conducting a review of its guidelines and issued a document on which it is consulting. That document makes it clear that there are a number of sound medical reasons for retaining organs. It describes the ideal practice for pathologists when explaining to relatives the possible reasons for retaining organs and the advantages that might accrue from that. It also stated that, when that is done sensitively but determinedly, it is unusual for relatives not to give permission for organs to be retained. The considerable advantages that that involves include medical research benefits and the fact that a fuller understanding is later available about why the death took place when it did. The document also suggests—

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) make the same case. In the article that I referred to earlier, Professor Robert Sells states:

> "Although there has been a significant rise in living organ donation during the last two years, 30 per cent. of relatives still object to organs being removed from a bereaved loved one."

That conflicts with the hon. Gentleman's argument.

Mr. Harvey: In fairness, we are discussing two slightly different matters. I was discussing retention of organs after a post mortem when there has been a suggestion that doing so may teach us about the medical circumstances of the death. I was not discussing those who died in, for example, accidents.

The royal college has made suggestions about what should be best practice in terms of explaining to and communicating with bereaved relatives. If such an approach were adopted in general, there would not be such a scandal about the retention of organs. However, that approach is not common practice. No one really knows what the scale of organ retention is—it has a chequered pattern throughout the country. Some hospitals that have retained organs on a widespread basis do not know why they are doing it, and in the most bizarre

cases hospitals have lost documentation about the organs that they have. They might find some years later that they have all sorts of organs about which they had forgotten because they did not have the proper records.

The situation throughout the country is a grim and grizzly picture. The previous Secretary of State rightly instructed the chief medical officer to conduct a national survey to establish, as best he can, a national picture. The Secretary of State helped me to speak to the chief medical officer about that matter; I believe that he has the right approach and that if he can obtain honest, candid and accurate responses from hospital authorities we could form a better idea about what to do next.

This subject involves various strange developments. Parents at Bristol have had to go through three separate phases of grief. They suffered the initial grief of losing a baby unexpectedly. Years after they had got over that, they discovered that the circumstances of their baby's death was part of a wider picture involving the incompetence of medical professionals, which re-opened their wounds. Having come to terms with that, they suffered a third grief—they discovered that organs that they believed had been buried or cremated with their child had been retained without their knowledge or permission.

Parents who cremated their babies are in strange legal territory because it is not legally permissible to cremate organs on their own. I am grateful to the Home Office for its response in this regard. When it learned about the parents' distress it adopted—or it encouraged a funeral director to adopt—a pragmatic interpretation of the law in this regard. That enabled people in the south-west and south Wales to go to that funeral director, whose approach disregarded the problem. The Home Office is aware that the subject needs to be revisited in a legal review.

Several hon. Members have already discussed the shortage of organs that are available for transplantation. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) appeared to support an opt-out system. The key point, which has been made by the BMA and by my hon. Friend, is that our approach should be considered only after extensive public education, advertising and debate. The decision to go down that road should be made only when the process of education and advertising has advanced considerably. Evidence from other countries suggests that that approach can produce a better supply of organs, which has tangible benefits. There are various reasons why other countries have a better supply, and we need to be aware of them all when we consider the matter.

I was struck by the evidence that the hon. Member for Cotswold quoted about the impact of counselling on the number of people who are prepared to sign up. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon and the hon. Member for Linlithgow mentioned breakthroughs in scientific advances, which will increase the need and demand for organs. I hope that the Minister of State will discuss that.

The hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) rightly discussed ventilation, which has been stopped on legal grounds. I echo his call on the Minister to consider whether changes in the law might enable us to get around that problem.

My key point is that I do not believe that there is any connection between this macabre, horrible and widespread practice of organ retention—when the chief medical officer has completed his survey, I suspect that it may be found to have occurred on a larger scale than some press reports have speculated—and transplantation, both of which are serious issues. As many hon. Members said this morning, it is vital to obtain a better supply of organs for transplantation.

Finally, I echo the words of those hon. Members who congratulated the hon. Member for Cotswold on securing a debate on these two interesting issues.

10.57 am

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on securing this debate and on raising several important issues. I also echo the views of the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey), who said that we are discussing distinct issues that should not be regarded as being exactly the same.

My constituency shares borders with the relevant Bristol constituencies, and I entirely understand the despair of the parents who are involved. They discovered that their consent had not been sought at the time and later they were not given information about decisions. It is the latter fact that caused them so much grief so late in the day. As the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said, all hon. Members must accept that the removal of organs for research without proper ethical consent is totally unacceptable. I am sure that there is no difference of opinion in that regard between the political parties.

Our debate today is inevitably tinged with sadness. We are carrying the burden of the hopes of the chronically sick, who want something that we all take for granted—the chance to have a normal life span. We must balance that against the sadness of the untimely death of an otherwise healthy person and the inevitable grief of his or her relatives, who find it difficult to make rational decisions at that time.

A third sadness is also involved—it concerns the small number of people who carry donor cards or who are donor registered. While my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold was speaking, I checked to see whether my donor card was in my wallet, but I discovered that it was not there. I wonder how often that happens. Those of us who believe that we are willing to give any of our organs for transplantation may walk outside and be hit by the proverbial bus, but we may find it difficult to have our wishes carried out. Of course, in that situation we would also be suffering the difficulty of having been hit by a bus.

What reforms should be introduced? The purpose of debates in this Chamber is to raise issues and to give pointers about what should be done. We want the 4,000 patients who are awaiting kidney transplantation and who are on dialysis, and those who suffer from cardiomyopathies and who are awaiting a heart transplant, to be given the chance to have a healthy life style. As several hon. Members have said, we must avoid the heartbreaking situation that involves patients having to watch their chance of life being buried or cremated—they are denied the healthy existence that we all take for granted.

[Dr. Liam Fox]

As the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said, we are in some ways the victims of our own success. Our success in reducing death from road traffic accidents, not least through our seat belt legislation, has put us into a more difficult position in that we now have fewer organs available for transplantation from otherwise healthy adults. We created that problem through legislation and we have a duty to try to address it.

I would like the Minister to reply to two or three specific points. At the moment, we are all consumed by millennium hysteria and all sorts of frivolous projects for our entertainment are being proposed. I hope that Parliament can give a lead by setting up some projects that will give a chance, not for entertainment, but for survival. We as a population have many contacts with health professionals and next year, as part of the millennium celebrations, I would like the Minister to dedicate a month in which everyone who has contact with a health professional—a GP, a hospital doctor, a pharmacist, or a dentist, for example—is given a form to register as a donor, and in which every health professional tells everyone that he or she comes into contact with what can be achieved, as part of a wider programme of health education. It will not cost anything and will take only a few moments of a health professional's time, but could make a huge difference in terms of public education and understanding.

Will the Minister consult his colleagues to see whether it is possible to include a form with the annual communication that we all receive—those of us who fail to fill in the form on time receive several of them—on electoral registration? It would go to every household, at almost no cost to Government, and increase public awareness of what can be done simply by filling in a form. Those are cost-free measures that cut across Governments and across Departments and are easily achievable, giving vast benefit to all our society, not least to those who need a transplant. As the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon said, we need an updated donor register, using the available information technology, to ensure that the information is always available at our fingertips at the correct time. It is all very well to spend an hour and a half debating the issues—an hour and a half immediately after death is a long time. The decisions have to be made very quickly.

In presenting this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold talked about the difficult position of relatives at a time of great grief and reduced ability to make rational decisions. We all understand that, but it gives all the greater urgency to the proposal for an education project. My hon. Friend referred to the Spanish survey showing the number of people who make a decision that they regret later. I am sure that everyone present sympathises with that plight. It seems to add an unnecessary grief to those who have already undergone the pain of bereavement.

We need to have the political debate on opting out. I understand why Ministers would find that difficult. I have no doubt that the civil servants advising the Minister will be saying, "But Minister, can you imagine the story in the tabloids when for the first time a mother says that her daughter just did not get round to opting out, but always wanted to, and that her organs have been taken against her will?" Ministers will face that unpalatable situation and we can all imagine the tabloid treatment that such a case would attract. However, we balance that against the real, on-going tragedy, not of those in elected office, but of those who are being denied the chance of a healthy life because of the shortage of organs for transplantation. We need to put the interests of those people higher up the agenda.

Dr. Harris: I accept the necessity for the balance to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but it must be stressed that the system of presumed consent proposed by the BMA could involve a check with relatives—not necessarily to ask their views, but to ask whether they knew of any undisclosed wish on the part of the deceased to opt out. That would underline a respect for the donor's wishes. There will be people who never got round to opting out but who discussed doing so, and that must be recognised since I do not doubt that there might be controversial media coverage of occasional cases with any system.

Dr. Fox: I am sure that that is correct. My point was simply that there will always be political resistance to a Minister, of whatever party, being pilloried in the tabloid press and being made a scapegoat in what may be rather unpleasant coverage.

I would like the Minister to tell us about the evidence from other countries on opting out and what difference it has made to the number of organs available. I note that one of his colleagues said:

> "More importantly, there is no evidence from European countries that have an opt-out that it would increase the number of organs available."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 245.]

I would like to know the basis for that information and whether it can be published by Ministers so that we can have a better-informed debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) mentioned elective ventilation. Again, I would like the Minister to comment on what consideration is being given to that. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon mentioned the shortage of intensive care beds; that will be a major practical problem, but perhaps the Minister could deal with the theoretical rather than the practical aspect of that and let us know the Government's thinking on it.

Finally, I hope that our actions and our words today remove a great source of sadness, despair and unnecessary death. We have a chance to give life and there can be no duty on us, as Members of Parliament, greater than that. I hope that we do not fail in that duty.

11.7 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on raising these important matters and on giving us the opportunity to discuss what has turned out to be a wide range of matters relating to organ donation and transplantation—matters which, as all hon. Members have said, touch on complex ethical, moral and legal considerations. I shall try to respond to all the points that have been made.

The hon. Member for Cotswold expressed his concerns about the developments at Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool and about the issue of the removal of organs. The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) also spent considerable time on that point. Both hon. Members made good speeches, with thoughtful and substantial content. It may be helpful if I set some of the issues at Alder Hey into context and offer some thoughts about the legal background to them.

Evidence given to the Bristol Royal infirmary inquiry in September indicated that organs removed following post mortems were being stored at hospitals elsewhere in the country, including at Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool. Local investigations at Alder Hey revealed an additional issue, relating to organs allegedly retained in breach of protocols by a pathologist undertaking research into sudden infant death syndrome. Consequently, this debate is set against a background of increasing sensitivities and serious concerns around the protocols governing the retention of tissues and organs at post-mortem examination.

The events at Alder Hey children's hospital are obviously enormously distressing for the families concerned and present major questions about children's organ retention in the NHS. I, as I am sure do all hon. Members, extend my sympathies to all the families concerned in this tragedy. An internal inquiry, which the local trust set up when the issue first came to light, is due to report early in the new year. It is essential that we now seek to restore public confidence in health services at Alder Hey children's hospital, a hospital with a fine reputation for high-quality care for children.

On 3 December, we announced that we would set up an independent inquiry into the events at Alder Hey children's hospital, which will report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State by the end of March next year. That report will be made public. A team comprising a patient's representative, a leading pathologist and someone with an appropriate legal qualification will conduct the inquiry, which will be entirely independent of the hospital. The inquiry will specifically consider what happened at Alder Hey to identify lessons to be learned, and to recommend to the Secretary of State further actions that might be necessary to reform organ retention practices at the hospital and to better support the families affected.

Before the Bristol Royal infirmary and Alder Hey cases became the subject of media attention, my Department and the Royal College of Pathologists had begun work on new guidelines in recognition of the sensitivities around the issue and the need for greater openness. The new guidelines for the retention of tissues at post-mortem examination are being developed in the light of the need for greater openness and better public information, married to best clinical practice. Wide consultation has ensured that the views of patient representatives have been taken on board.

The guidelines represent a dramatic shift in approach, with an emphasis on transparency and sensitive management of the bereaved, which are concerns that we have all referred to today. They also include a new model consent form for bereaved relatives to sign. We hope that the guidelines will be ready for dissemination in the new year, and the Department will clearly need to scrutinise them closely.

Several hon. Members referred to the present legislation regulating organ removal during post mortems, so it might help if I spoke about those provisions. It will not surprise hon. Members to discover that the legal situation is complex. I do not think that I have ever been asked to make a speech in which I have not been given that to say. The legal situation is always complex—a legacy from lawyers.

As I understand it, the Coroners Act 1988 permits the removal of tissues and organs during the course of a post mortem called for by a coroner even without the agreement or consent of relatives. Rule 9 of the 1984 coroners rules permits the preservation of materials which, in a pathologist's opinion, bear on the cause of death. In relation to coroners' post mortems, organs can be retained only to establish the cause of death and for such time as agreed by a coroner. In Britain, 90 per cent. of post mortems are called for by coroners and are therefore conducted under the 1988 Act.

Hospital post mortems are quite different. The Human Tissue Act 1961 refers to the relative not objecting to the removal of organs. However, the Act does not specifically require the relative's consent before the removal of tissues or organs. The Act therefore makes no provision to determine the purpose for which any retained organs can be used. Previous practice in relation to hospital post mortems may not seem compatible with the modern concept of informed consent.

Mr. Dalyell: I would not try to amend the 1961 Act. Dr. Gavin Thurston, then an inner London coroner, wrote an interesting paper on the problems that face coroners. It was written a long time ago but may have current relevance. Will my hon. Friend ask his officials whether it is somewhere in the departmental archives?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has a legendary memory. I shall certainly make that inquiry and see what we can dig up.

I want to refer to the chief medical officer's inquiry, as several hon. Members have already done so. We asked him in October to investigate the scale of organ retention in the national health service generally, including in children's hospitals, and how NHS pathologists undertake that important work. The report will ensure that clinical practice on the subject throughout the NHS respects the rights and wishes of patients, while enabling the study of illness to benefit patients. We should always bear it in mind that the pathological and clinical examination of tissues and organs is a proper and important function of medical diagnosis and of furthering the understanding of medical science. Of course, as many hon. Members have made clear, those benefits must be balanced against the need for public acceptance and informed individual consent.

The chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, will ensure that lessons from the events at Alder Hey children's hospital can be learned throughout the NHS. As part of his investigation, he is conducting a census of organ retention and practice on consent in all NHS hospitals in England. I am especially grateful to the hon. Member for North Devon for his support of that work. The chief medical officer's inquiry will consider the

[Mr. Hutton]

practice of removing and retaining organs as well as the legal framework in which that takes place. Ministers have asked him to provide a comprehensive report on how such matters can be dealt with in future.

Much of our debate has focused on organ transplantation. Patients who might become donors are typically people in intensive care units who have had a sudden brain injury, such as a stroke, or as a result of a road accident. Of course, doctors' principal duty is to make every effort to save a patient's life. If a patient dies despite their efforts and is certified brain stem dead, organ donation can be considered. First, two doctors must be called in who have no connection to the transplantation unit. Each will independently carry out a series of tests to confirm that a patient is brain stem dead. When that has been confirmed, the local transplant co-ordinator is contacted. He will check to see if the potential donor has a card or is registered on the NHS organ donor register. I shall respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) about the register in a moment.

If the deceased has made his or her wishes clear, the transplant co-ordinator can approach the family to discuss donation with confidence. Objection is almost unknown if families are aware that their loved ones wanted to donate. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) drew attention to the fact that he did not have his organ transplant card with him. We always point out how important it is that people who are willing to donate their organs communicate that to their families, so that even the physical absence of an organ donation card will not stand in the way of organ removal and transplantation.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: There is a practical problem. A lot of people do not have their donor cards with them for one reason or another—their wallets might have been stolen, or they might have lost them. Will the Minister consider establishing a better link between those who carry organ donor cards and the placing of names on the national organ donor register? That way, it would be possible in a matter of seconds, even if people did not have their cards with them, to establish that they were willing to donate their organs.

Mr. Hutton: I hope that that would be the case in most circumstances, but I shall certainly consider that point. However, if organ donors have made no record of their wishes and their families have not discussed the issue, the transplant co-ordinator's task is much harder. Overall, three of every four families generously and courageously agree to donation.

Whether there is a formal record of the wishes or not, the transplant co-ordinator will talk to families and ensure that they have no objection. There is no question of a transplant taking place against the wishes of the family. The history of the donor will also be checked to confirm that there are no medical or social contra-indications to donation.

If permission is obtained, the transplant co-ordinator will contact the United Kingdom Transplant Support Service Authority. It maintains the national transplant database, which contains details of all potential organ transplants and recipients in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. A search of the database is made to find the most suitable patients. Once the patients and their locations are identified, the doctors at those transplant units are alerted and asked to confirm acceptance of the organ. As they do so, the preparation of their patients for the transplant operation begins.

A team of specialist surgeons is called to the donor's hospital to carry out the surgery to remove and preserve the organs for transport to the transplant unit. If necessary, special transport arrangements will be made to ensure that no time is lost. The process of recovery and new life can then begin for the patient. Meanwhile, once the first immediate pain of bereavement has passed, many donor families find profound comfort in the thought that their relatives' organs have enabled others to live.

Several hon. Members referred to the shortage of organs suitable for transplant. So far this year, 2,517 people have received life-saving operations. My figures are accurate up to 10 December, which was Friday of last week. Organs from 900 donors give a new lease of life to more than 3,000 people every year in the United Kingdom, and a further 3,000 people have their sight restored. Transplants are now so successful that many more patients can be considered for such treatment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said. More people are being added to the waiting list each week, faster than organs become available.

Currently, 6,730 people are on the waiting list for transplantation in the United Kingdom. The vast majority of them are waiting for kidney transplants, and will have a much-reduced quality of life on dialysis while they are waiting. For those waiting for hearts or livers, there is of course no alternative to transplantation. As several hon. Members have rightly said, the success of other policies has exacerbated the problem of availability of organs for donation. The main source of organs suitable for donation is people who have died from sudden brain injury, such as that which can be caused by a stroke or a road traffic accident. Partly as a result of the legislation to which the hon. Member for Woodspring referred, the United Kingdom now has one of the lowest rates of road traffic deaths in the world. Together with advances in neurosciences, that has resulted in a reduction by about two thirds in deaths from intracranial haemorrhage since 1970. Those developments are significant and are warmly welcomed, but, as hon. Members have recognised, they have implications for the subject of the debate.

It is obviously urgent for many more of us to agree that when we die our organs should be used for transplantation. Some people have argued—we have heard such arguments today—that the shortage of organs means that we should change the basis of organ donation in Britain to an opt-out system, as the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon strongly believes. Such an approach would mean that, unless people have registered their unwillingness to be donors, their organs could be taken and used. Some people believe that that approach would lead to a vast increase in the number of organs available for transplantation, but the Government do not believe that that is the case.

The hon. Member for Woodspring referred to a parliamentary answer. We do not think that there is any clear evidence that, where an opt-out approach has been introduced and rates have risen, it is the sole factor in higher donation rates. Other important factors include different cultural attitudes to the disposal of bodies, greater numbers of intensive care beds, more aggressive procurement policies and road death rates.

Dr. Fox: Can the Minister assist the debate by publishing the data that the Department has considered in relation to differences in other countries, so that all hon. Members might have the benefit of being able to make up their minds on their importance?

Mr. Hutton: We shall certainly share with the hon. Gentleman as much information as we can. As I understand it, his argument is that such information relates simply to the difference between an opt-out and an opt-in system, which can be quantified and measured in the availability of organs. I am trying to tell him and other hon. Members who have advanced similar arguments that the matter is not that simple.

Dr. Harris: First, I have never said that an opt-out system would "vastly increase", to use the Minister's words, the number of available organs. I do not believe that supporters of such an approach have suggested that, and such a suggestion should not be put up just to be shot down. Secondly, supporters of a shift to presumed consent do not offer their support solely on the basis of the organ shortage. I have already referred to the paramountcy of the donor's views and to the need for relatives not to have to second-guess those. Thirdly, the European transplantation forum considered the evidence, and suggested that an opt-out system, such as that used in Belgium, could well be a factor in increased availability of organs. That change involved a control group of hospitals that did not shift to the new system and shared everything else in common with those in the rest of the country, but did not benefit from an increase in the supply of organs.

Mr. Hutton: I am well aware of the hon. Gentleman's views on the subject. He will know, however, that only the BMA—which is not an unimportant source of opinion—has supported his suggestion of an opt-out scheme. As I understand it, the professional opinion of most other relevant bodies is either divided or hostile to the notion. For example, I am advised that the United Kingdom Transplant Co-ordinators Association would not accept any version of the opt-out approach that did not include a requirement to gain family agreement. During the debate and, I think, in the summer, it has appeared that the hon. Gentleman does not support that suggestion. As I understand it, he would support the removal of an organ notwithstanding whether the family involved wished to withdraw consent.

Dr. Harris: I am grateful to the Minister for giving me the chance to clarify my views. As I said at the BMA conference, when relatives strongly object to organ removal, despite a donor having indicated that he or she wished to donate by not opting out when the opportunity arose, the relatives' wishes should be respected. I believe that the majority of people operating within the BMA and promulgating its policy recognise that practical point. It is fair to say that professional opinion is split. However, the trend among bodies such as the National Kidney Federation, which has adopted a policy of considering presumed consent after an education period, is towards considering the option.

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for clarifying that point, and I am sorry if I misrepresented his argument. I have listened closely to his remarks, however, and I understood him to be suggesting that an organ may be removed and made available for transplantation notwithstanding the strong views of family or relatives. The hon. Gentleman referred to Austria and Belgium, which are often cited as examples of countries with opt-out systems and higher donation rates than our own. However, those countries have double the road accident rates that we have. Organs are suitable for transplant only if the donor patient died as a result of sudden brain injury and was receiving mechanical ventilation in an intensive care unit when death occurred. Many such deaths occur as a result of road accidents.

The concerns expressed today are evidence that public confidence in the system in place is crucial. We know that there is public support for the current system of donation, in which potential donors opt in, rather than for an opt-out or presumed consent approach. For example, a Department of Health survey commissioned in July found that 50 per cent. of people were in favour of the current system and that only 28 per cent. were in favour of an opt-out system. The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the terms of the survey, as we have already discussed these matters. It established that there is a strong preference for the current system.

The sensitivity of the organ donor programme to adverse publicity, to which the hon. Member for Woodspring rightly referred, has been illustrated by events in France, which has opt-out legislation. There was a strong public reaction when a couple discovered that their son's eyes had been removed against their wishes. That is exactly the scenario to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The incident received widespread coverage in the French media, and led to a 20 per cent. drop in organ donation and to a 30 per cent. drop in corneal donation. It took three to four years for the donation rate to recover. Such considerations are important, and we must keep them under review. To reassure the public, French law was amended to require relatives to be approached when the donor's wishes are not clear.

Although opt-out implies that organs should be taken unless the dead person is known to have objected to donation, doctors do not in practice assert their right to take organs against the wishes of the grieving family. Apart from sensitivity to families' distress, there are also practical difficulties, such as the need to consult the family in case there was something in a potential donor's health or life style that would make him or her unsuitable for donation.

Mr. Dalyell: Will my hon. Friend at least see Lord Winston, who last night presented a powerful case on therapeutic cloning? Many hon. Members are interested in these matters.

Mr. Hutton: I shall certainly do so. The best person to see Lord Winston may be my noble Friend Lord Hunt, the Under-Secretary of State with specific responsibilities in the Department for such matters.

I am not sure whether I shall be able to respond in the limited time remaining to all of the points made. I shall try to do so as quickly as possible. The hon. Member for Woodspring referred to a number of proposals that he had in mind for improving the system. We shall of course consider any of his proposals. We keep an open mind about these matters, and we are keen to find any way of improving the existing system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow asked what consideration we are giving to the use of therapeutic cloning. As he said, the issues are complex and involve morality, ethics and law. The Department keeps them under vigorous consideration through various advisory groups, including the gene therapy advisory committee and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority.

The hon. Members for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) and for Oxford, West and Abingdon mentioned elective ventilation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. Time is up.

Sport Funding

11.30 am

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I have great pleasure in introducing this Adjournment debate—my first in Westminster Hall—on equal funding for men and women in sport. The emphasis of the debate is on boosting the position of women in sport. In this country, women in sport get a raw deal from the private sector in terms of sponsorship, pay and prize money, as well as from individuals, sports associations and television. Women also get a raw deal from the state through virtually all its agencies: central and local government, sports councils, centres of excellence and lottery funds. They certainly get a raw deal overall. In fact, the situation is so bad that many women are discouraged from pursuing their sport, even though they clearly have talent.

The situation in the United States is very different, at least with regard to federal funding. The Education Amendment Acts of 1972 included a provision known as Title IX. Apart from some exemptions—for example, for colleges controlled by religious organisations or the military—Title IX forbids any education programme that receives federal funds from discriminating on the basis of sex. It provides that federal aid to any programme or institution that refuses to comply may be terminated. Title IX ensures equal funding and equal opportunities for athletics programmes in US schools and universities, regardless of sex. That policy is not only fairer but has been rewarded with success.

In July, the United States women's football team won the women's world cup in sell-out stadiums. About 90,000 people saw the final at the Rose Bowl and another 40 million people watched it on television. My American friends, mostly men, were enormously excited at the achievement of their team. One said to me, "You should have a debate on Title IX in Parliament."

The *International Herald Tribune* of 3 July attributed the success of their team to Title IX and said:

"The women on the soccer team are products of competitive college sports programmes that did not exist before the law. Girls can now dream of a professional career in athletics, something that seemed unattainable even five years ago."

Although the article acknowledged that equality in sport has a long way to go, it said that it

"holds the promise of what women in America can achieve in sports."

About 7.5 million girls now play soccer in the US, compared with 50,000 in Germany, which is the best figure that Europe can provide. The defender Lorrie Fair said:

"Title IX has given girls something to shoot for. It sent the message that if you work hard you have the chance to play your sport at a high level and get a college education. It lets girls know there are opportunities out there for them."

Before the law in 1972, one girl participated in school and college sport for every 27 boys; now the figure is one to three. Before Title IX, only one in 27 women in high school played sport. That number has risen to one in nine. Sports scholarships are now more readily available to young women. On 28 June, Reuters reported that many of the most recognisable sports stars in the United States are now women: Sheryl Swoopes of the basketball team the Houston Comets; the tennis

professionals, Venus and Serena Williams; and Juli Inkster, who won the Ladies Professional Golf Association championships. It said:

"Assured, aggressive and media-friendly, they and the US women's soccer team are a far cry from the earliest American female athletes, who were relegated to such ladylike sports as badminton and archery, which could be played in long dresses."

The publisher Suzanne Grimes said:

"There is now a whole generation for which sport has become a natural part of their lives."

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Is my hon. Friend aware that, in one sport, the very ladylike sport of chess, less than 4 per cent. of the annual UK grant of £50,000—itself a small amount—goes to the women's game? Is that not appalling, in view of the real progress being made by women and girls in that sport? For example, Harriet Hunt, the women's top board at the recent European team championships in Georgia was the first UK player to capture a board one gold, defeating strong women grand masters from Ukraine and Hungary. That success is replicated around the country. In my constituency, the Cheddleton and Leek club scored seven victories when seven girls entered the junior congress in Staffordshire.

Mr. Cohen: My hon. Friend makes her point well. I know that she has campaigned on that issue. The disproportionate funding for women in that game is mirrored in other sports.

What a contrast there is between the United States and Britain. We are increasingly becoming a nation of couch potatoes, and in addition women are discouraged from taking up serious sport. Old sexist attitudes die hard—in fact, they are not dead at all. Buster Mottram is quoted in the *Daily Mirror* of 8 October. He said:

"Until recently, even heavy doses of Viagra would not have made 90 per cent. of women players attractive to 80-year-old men in lycra shorts."

We know that, in several countries, traditional culture or religion can pose barriers to women in sport. For us, the attitudes are stupid, sexist and deeply old-fashioned. *The Independent* on 14 July stated:

"But for all the men's complaints, Title IX has brought a sharp increase in girls' participation in sport that contrasts favourably with the decline in Britain, where the squeeze on extra-curricular activities and the sell-off of playing fields have contributed to a precipitate fall in school sport that has disproportionately affected girls."

On 4 July, referring to the women's world cup, the *Observer* said:

"Unfortunately, for Britain—still hidebound when it comes to popular attitudes to women in sport—we had no part in the finals. England, the highest rated British team, finished last in the qualifying group. Britain is not yet near to catching up Nixon-era America. Only about half of Britain's state schools offer football to girls as well as boys"—

I suspect that that is at varying levels of quality. Kelly Simmons, the FA women's football coach, said:

"It is unfortunately dependent on the school having a PE teacher with an interest to push the sport."

The *Observer* concluded:

"There is no requirement for British schools to offer equal sports opportunities to both sexes. Britain is doomed to watch this revolution from the substitutes' bench of history."

It is a great struggle for women competitors to train and compete properly. The *Daily Mirror* of 29 September referred to Sarah Winckless, the 25-year-old rower who hopes to take part in next year's Olympics. She relies on national lottery funding, sponsorship from Virgin and part-time work to stay afloat while she trains. Of course, the equipment she needs is very expensive. She cannot even afford to start a pension because she does not earn enough.

In January, *The Daily Telegraph* reported a funding crisis in women's hockey. The women's hockey team had to cancel a tour of Australia in the build-up to the Olympics, and the appointment of a national co-ordinator was put on hold. Junior development programmes were completely dispensed with, and the UK Sports Council cut much of its world-class performance plan for hockey. One person said that lottery funding is okay for individuals, but not for teams, such as hockey teams. I do not know if the situation has changed since January, and whether the players did in fact go on tour, but it was certainly a great disruption to their effort in preparing for world-class standard.

Women's football in this country does not meet international standards. Women footballers are paid next to nothing and given little access to top-class facilities. Lilleshall, the national footballing centre, makes no provision for girls while thousands of pounds are spent on each boy. Our best women footballers have to seek scholarships in the US. There is a slow increase in the linking of local women's teams with men's league clubs. That is a good thing, but it often amounts to little more than just providing them with the kit. Sometimes that is unhelpful because the clubs are tied to a single sponsor and the women's teams are precluded from finding their own funding.

The Football Association lives up to its initials as far as women's soccer is concerned. After the first world war, larger crowds attended women's soccer matches than men's, so the FA banned those games. It is still not interested in women's soccer. How about equal access to and use of the new Wembley stadium?

There is a problem in our schools. *The Scotsman* on 3 February reported that girls are poorly served by mixed physical education classes and PE instructors are often insensitive to equal opportunities because they mark girls down. It referred to the trend of making PE a boys-only option. That is outrageous. Television, including the BBC, fails properly to cover and promote women's sport. When the television cameras are on, they are pointed at male athletes. Only 5 per cent. of sports coverage is devoted to female athletes.

There are serious health and safety implications in our approach to women's sport. A report this week shows that the United Kingdom tops the heart disease league in Europe, but there is a trend, of which Princess Diana was a good role model, of women pursuing health and fitness in the gymnasium and through sport beyond their teenage years—for instance, hundreds of women compete in the London marathon. Women want to keep fit and, if they have the opportunity to do so, their sons and perhaps even their husbands will follow them. That will improve health and sport in general.

I want to express my own brand of chauvinism, which is British chauvinism. I want us to win more prizes and

[Mr. Cohen]

medals, but we are underperforming. Boosting women's sport would increase our medal count and, in the long term, improve our men's performances.

What is to be done? I urge the Minister to prepare a comprehensive programme, with equal opportunities at its core, involving all official sports bodies. Schools and PE instructors must be included. We should open gyms, sports centres, playing fields and swimming pools so that women have equal access at an affordable price. The lottery should be forbidden to discriminate against women's sport; in fact, it should be required to boost it. No state money should be given to the official sports associations unless they have realistic women's sport development programmes. Lilleshall and the centres of excellence should operate effectively on behalf of women athletes. We should also encourage television, newspapers and advertising agencies to elevate the profile of sportswomen so that, as role models, they get young girls into sport.

Let us have a Title IX to get on track to winning. Earlier this year, President Clinton said:

"This is about more than sports. This is about the fundamental right of every human being to dream and work and strive and the obligation never to quit, never to give in, never to be limited, never to be defined. And our obligation to see that all those who come behind us have that right to jump and soar in athletics, in music, in every endeavour".

11.45 am

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on securing the debate. This important issue has not been discussed specifically in the House for a long time and the debate is overdue. I also welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins). It is good to see her here.

Many women believe that there is an injustice in the way in which funding for sport is distributed. More women than ever find that regular physical exercise improves health, self-confidence and well-being. There has been huge growth recently in women's team sports, especially football and rugby, which are among the fastest growing sports. The Government's sport for all policy is designed to ensure that that trend continues.

As more women recognise the benefits of sport, it is important that they and their sports are able to access funding. However, it is vital that funding is not given for the sake of it as an artificial way of making up for past imbalances. As with all funding, we must ensure that it is properly targeted. Money that is given to women's sport must help to identify sporting potential and attract more women and girls into sport.

I met a large number of governing bodies of all sports over the past few months including those that represent women's sports, such as rugby union, football, cricket, netball and hockey. I also met the Womens Sports Foundation. We explored how to give women's sport a higher profile and I heard important views on the recent equal opportunities report. Those organisations were keen to raise many of the issues that were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead. They told me about the difficulties that women's sport and minority sports, which might be played by men, have in obtaining sponsorship. They highlighted the problem of the link between sponsorship and media coverage. There is no doubt what difference it makes for women's sport to get coverage on terrestrial or satellite television. The women's netball team's recent bronze-medal win in the world championship in New Zealand was shown on the BBC's terrestrial programme "Grandstand" on Sunday afternoon. It had a huge impact on people who had not seen netball since their school days. It was clear how much the sport had changed; it is now faster and more professional. When I watched the team play, the game was very different from my days as captain of the school netball team.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport works closely with the sports councils and Departments across Whitehall, including the women's unit in the Cabinet Office, to consider what more can be done to use sport to help women in other aspects of their lives. I am keen that sport, be it men's or women's, is not an add-on or sideshow, but a central part of Government policy, because it can deliver in many ways. For example, it has an impact on social exclusion and helps to reduce crime and drug dependency among young people.

Recent research by the Womens Sports Foundation in America shows a clear link between sport and teenage pregnancy. Young teenagers are much less likely to become pregnant if they are involved in active sport and recreation. They have greater self-esteem and self-confidence. I want us to do more work on that so that we prove it through research—although it is common sense to me—and women's sport gets the funding that it deserves.

The subject of our debate is equal funding for men's and women's sports. Funding is an important part of ensuring that women are able to participate in sport and physical activities at both the grass roots and elite levels, but we must ensure that we remove all the barriers that discourage women from participating. We must further ensure that the funding is used wisely to the benefit of everyone.

More than £6 million of Exchequer funding goes to sports governing bodies. As one of the conditions of that funding, all governing bodies are required to have proposals for the development of women's sport. That did not happen in the past, but it is now making a difference to each governing body. That money also funds activities that are specifically designed to encourage more women and girls into sport. Moreover, all sports bodies are required to demonstrate how women's sport will be encouraged as part of any application to the lottery sports fund. Lottery funding requirements mean that all facilities should operate non-discriminatory access policies and their marketing policies and programmes of use should ensure inclusion.

Organisations that cannot prove that they are doing that have already been refused funding. It is making a real difference to sports clubs' approach towards women. They may not be changing for the right reason, but they are having to change and to think through how funding is to be spent. The new rules have helped to raise the issue of discriminatory practice in club membership. Perhaps more than anything, they are helping to increase women's participation rates, including in some of the sports that have traditionally been seen as male dominated.

The world-class performance programme is another lottery-funded initiative. Of the 1,351 athletes—in the widest sense—currently supported by it, 596 are women, which means that they receive almost 45 per cent. of the total funding of £84 million. That is a real improvement and shows that women are reaching the higher levels in terms of funding. It does not solve the problem of how to get more women to come through, but when they have come through and their talent has been identified, they are receiving their share of world-class performance funding. As well as going to individuals, that money has gone to team events such as women's rugby and women's cricket.

The subject of equal prize money frequently comes up, especially in relation to Wimbledon. Everyone would accept that the contribution that sportswomen make to sporting competitions is just as good as that of men—if not better in many cases. The organisers and governing bodies have the final say on how much money people will be paid, but the subject is continually reviewed.

Although there is some good news, I want to improve the rate of women's participation in sports generally. Clearly, if we get things right at the base and ensure that more women and young girls come in, our strength in sports will be greater and our importance to sponsors and the media will increase. Together with colleagues at the Department for Education and Employment, I am studying recent research into what turns young girls off physical education and school sport.

Changes in the national curriculum for physical education will allow more flexibility at key stage 4, which I hope will help to ensure that young girls stay involved in some kind of sport and recreation. We must capture their interest and remember that many young girls in their early teens—a difficult age—are concerned with how they look and do not want to mess up their hair. They are concerned with their image and self-esteem, and the issue must be handled carefully; that is why a good physical education teacher can make all the difference. We are working with the Department for Education and Employment to ensure that we get things right in schools for girls and that physical education teachers are well trained and able to cope with the problems to which my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead referred.

The issue of Title IX was prominent in my hon. Friend's speech. It governs the overall equity of treatment and opportunity in educational establishments. Clearly, it has been working in the United States, although there are different views on how successful it has been. Much evidence suggests that it has been successful in terms of participation, but some argue that it can hold back women's participation in some high-profile sports. It is also extremely difficult to enforce because, even on the rare occasions when schools and colleges have been taken to court, the penalty for non-compliance has hardly ever been dished out.

As my hon. Friend will know, sports structures in the United Kingdom are very different from those in America. In the United States, the highly commercialised sporting college concept is dominant, while the sports governing bodies are dominant here. It is not at all clear that the United Kingdom governing bodies as presently constituted would be able to meet the legal Title IX requirements for equal opportunities between men and women, especially without a greater commercial impetus. The Women's Netball Association pointed out that, if Title IX applied here, the Sports Council might have to withdraw funding from the English women's netball team if it could not demonstrate that it was providing equally for boys as well as girls. There are also problems in other sports.

I would not like anyone to think that all the women's sports governing bodies are keen to go down the Title IX route, because they are not. They are, however, keen to ensure that support continues to flow to women's sport from the national lottery. They also want to ensure a higher profile for debates about how we project women's sport, how we win more sponsorship and how we ensure that the media see women as sportswomen and not as women first, which is the angle that the newspapers take at the moment. We must work together to build on the magnficient achievements of some of our famous sportswomen. My hon. Friend referred to many in America, but let us not forget our role models: Mary Peters, Virginia Wade, Tessa Sanderson, Sally Gunnell and Tanni Grey are all excellent athletes, and more are coming on. I hope that we will achieve more successes at next year's Olympic games.

There are definitely some good news stories, but my hon. Friend is right to draw this issue to our attention. We must be careful that we do not assume that everything will automatically be all right if we carry on as we are. We must continually examine what we are doing and measure results to ensure that we give youngsters in particular the opportunities to get into sport. We have a solid foundation on which to build from the way in which the lottery has worked and how its equity principles have affected the thinking of sports governing bodies. Even the governing bodies that once seemed to take no interest in women's sport are now having to change.

We are determined to get more women to participate in sport at all levels. We must continue to produce athletes who will be the best in the world so that, as my hon. Friend said, they will win medals for this country and make us proud of our achievements—nothing makes us feel better than doing well at sport. I want to ensure that our country's success is measured not only in mainstream team sports such as cricket, rugby and football; there are many other good things going on in sport and in women's sport, and we must ensure that those achievements are trumpeted. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for introducing this debate. I shall take back to my Department all the points that he raised.

12 noon

Sitting suspended.

NHS Scientists

12.1 pm

On resuming—

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I am delighted to have an opportunity to discuss scientists in the national health service. This is the first opportunity that I have had to speak in Westminster Hall.

The Minister is aleady well aware of the issue. There has been a succession of parliamentary questions from other hon. Members and me throughout the year and earlier in the year the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union, which represents many of the members of staff involved, organised a big lobby. He is currently dealing directly with pay and conditions through negotiations, and is discussing his paper "Agenda for Change", which addresses many of the issues.

I am not here as a spokesman for the union although, in this case, the issues that it raises are valid. I have two reasons for bringing the matter to debate. First, as often happens, I was approached by a constituent—a laboratory scientist in the NHS who works at Guy's and St. Thomas' hospital. He wanted to alert me to problems. I was taken on a guided tour of the laboratories, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), who has a personal and professional interest in the matter. I was struck by the combination of the dedication of the staff and their unhappiness, sometimes amounting to bitterness, about the extent to which they had been overlooked in successive pay negotiation rounds. Frankly, they were in a parlous economic position.

Secondly, I represent a constituency with an exceptionally high number of professional scientists. It has two major physics and chemistry laboratories and many related scientific commercial enterprises. I therefore have an interest in promoting in Parliament science and the people who work in it. If one group of professional scientists is seriously undervalued, it sends the signal to all scientists that their qualifications and training are not valued.

The specific issue that I wish to raise is the problem—many would call it the scandal—of low pay among what are now called biomedical scientists. They are scientists at BSc (Hons.) level who enter the NHS and can train for up to five years to achieve a qualification that, as the Minister explained to me in a written answer yesterday, is not enshrined in law and is not fully portable. They serve a long apprenticeship on low pay to work within that cadre of professions.

For some years, the headline story has been of people at the bottom of the scale—trainees, laboratory technicians and trainee scientific officers—being hired on wages of approximately £7,500 a year. That is only a little more than the minimum wage, and those of them with dependants would certainly qualify for family credit. The Minister will, no doubt, say that his offer to professionals, which he confirmed in a written answer yesterday, will take care of their problem. None the less, assuming that the pay offer is accepted, many young scientific officers will join the profession on about £9,500 or £10,000 a year. That is the status of the profession into which many of those people are moving.

Why is that a problem? First, many young professionals are emerging from university in near poverty. Unlike other workers, many have substantial debts—they have obtained student loans and have borrowed in lieu of student grants. They then have to enter a long and difficult apprenticeship on exceptionally low pay. Secondly, large differentials have opened up within the NHS. I welcome the advances in nurses' pay as much as anyone else—they are well deserved, long overdue and almost certainly inadequate. A grade D nurse, who is roughly comparable to those professionals in terms of educational qualifications and age, is probably joining the NHS on approximately £14,500. I do not begrudge the nurses anything that has been given to them, but they attract emotional and political support that backroom laboratory workers do not enjoy. That has contributed to the big disparity.

Invidious contrasts can be made with pay outside the NHS. People concerned with that group of workers and I have done some checking. The going rate for menial jobs in supermarkets, certainly in south-west suburban London, is probably between £9,500 and £10,000—roughly the same as that for scientists with degrees and student debts. The contrast is painful.

The other contrast is with people in the private sector. Again, I rely on anecdote, but I gather that laboratory technicians are paid about £16,000 or £16,500 by Glaxo Wellcome—one of the leading groups employing staff on roughly comparable grades to the NHS—whereas in the NHS they would be paid £10,000.

The problem is not just that that is invidious but that hospitals are increasingly contracting out scientific work. My local district general hospital, West Middlesex University hospital, now has a contract with Glaxo Wellcome for much of that work. I am troubled not only by the unfairness but by the economics. Why is the NHS having to contract out work of such quality and importance to the private sector, in which pay is much higher? One assumes that the NHS is not making savings and that it is having to do so because it cannot attract enough staff of the right quality. The same is true of agency nursing. The position of nurses is being undermined within the NHS, and the practice is extremely uneconomic: I suspect that the same is happening with scientists.

Why is there a wider problem? I have discussed the matter with people in the profession. Recruitment and retention are beginning to be seriously affected. The Government's figures, published in September, are helpful. They show that about 50 per cent of trusts have recruitment difficulties and 25 per cent have retention difficulties with scientific workers. The situation is not as extreme as it is with nurses, but it is much worse than with other groups of NHS workers and is becoming a big problem. The problem is especially acute in cytology—cancer detection. About a third of those scientists in the NHS are due to retire soon because of the age structure of their group. There is no sign that the NHS will be able to recruit on the scale required. That will affect the safety and security of cancer screenings and delay women waiting to receive test results. There is a particularly serious recruitment problem in that area. I realise that the Minister's offer acknowledged the problem, as there is a differentially favourable offer to cytology scientists. None the less, there is a major problem.

The issue of recruitment and retention reveals a wider problem: the integrity of the NHS as a whole. Any NHS hospital must operate as a team, with people in the front line and in the back room. Anything that weakens a key part weakens the whole system and I emphasise the importance of that group of professionals, the NHS scientists, in that context. The key area is cancer screening, as I said a few moments ago. We know from publicity about the failures in cancer screening that disasters can result, but that is not all. In the laboratory that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park visited, some of the key testing related to tuberculosis, which is now on a rapid growth curve, as the Minister explained to the press a few days ago. Early and accurate detection is critical in getting on top of a potential epidemic.

The laboratory also carried out tests for MRSA—methicillin-resistant streptococcus aureus—the effects of which are not fully understood in the United Kingdom, but which is reaching epidemic proportions, with enormous consequences for patients and for the functioning of hospitals because patients suffering from MRSA need to be isolated.

The problems arose from a political decision taken by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), when he was the Secretary of State for Health, to drop that group of workers from the pay review body. Why that decision was taken is shrouded in the mists of history, but it has had cumulatively disastrous consequences. As a result of successive rounds of settlements outside the pay review body structure, that group of workers has fallen roughly 30 per cent. behind. I know that the Minister is trying to tackle it now, but there is an enormous catch-up problem as a result of that decision.

I return to what I think the Government are trying to do to tackle the problem and the extent to which they appear to be succeeding or failing. The Minister told me yesterday in a written answer that they are making a serious attempt to get to grips with the shocking headline figures at the bottom of the scale by effectively removing the two bottom rungs. However, the laboratory staff told me that only one of the 40 employees there would benefit. It may be an isolated extreme, but the unhappiness in the laboratory, which I am sure is replicated elsewhere, is happening because the more experienced scientists and those in the middle of the scale will get an increase, if the offer is accepted, of about 3 per cent. That is lower than this year's increase for the public sector as a whole and lower than for those on average earnings. One anomaly has, rightly, been tackled, but the consequences are that, for most people in the profession, the underlying inequity has not been dealt with.

The Minister has addressed the issue of London weighting, which is welcome, because the problems of retention and recruitment are exceptionally severe in London. There will be a 13 per cent. increase in London weighting; applying the arithmetic to the current figures means that that is worth about £260 a year. That is welcome, but given the magnitude of the problem, it has not been tackled in a substantial way.

The key issue for the future—the real meat of the problem—is that the Minister has agreed that in future those categories should be brought within the pay review body structure, which is a welcome and positive step forward. The sting in the tail, however—perhaps the Minister will confirm it—is that he is suggesting that that should not happen until April 2001. People in the profession fear that by the time a review has taken place a year will have elapsed and by the time that negotiations have taken place on the basis of that review, another year will have passed. Therefore, it may be three or four years before the anomalies have been rectified; meanwhile, they are growing because the groups are not within the proper structure. Although I welcome the Minister's proposal, I ask him why it is not possible to bring these workers within the pay review body structure now, to start the process of examining their predicament. There is no overwhelming reason why that should not be done.

I recognise, as an Opposition Member must, that all this has to be paid for. I am not being flippant about that; I know that the priority is to improve services and it is right that that should be done. However, there is a link between improved services and the pay and conditions of NHS staff. If pay and conditions are not right there is inadequate and poor-quality recruitment, with mistakes and delays. Thus, ultimately, the cost to the public purse will be greater than if the upfront payment were made. The economics are not totally unambiguous.

As I said earlier, science is an important industry in my constituency and it is important, whether or not we are talking about the NHS, that scientists are recognised and rewarded appropriately and that the right signal is sent to people who are now aged 13, 14 and 15 and making choices about A-levels and careers. The present position is that there is a massive disincentive to go into science and a temptation to go for easier options. I hope that the bigger picture is not lost sight of within the minutiae of negotiation.

12.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing this debate. He has chosen to discuss the pay and conditions of NHS scientists. They are a small group of about 14,000 people within the health service, but they are, none the less, an important group of staff, who make a crucial contribution to patient care through their work in diagnostic techniques and treatment.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he made his case and for acknowledging some of the measures that the Government have already taken on the matter. I shall develop my remarks in the context of the wider changes in the pay system in the NHS to which he referred.

It is important to acknowledge that both clinical and biomedial scientists work in the NHS on a range of activities that use scientific principles to determine the extent, cause and treatment of a wide variety of patient conditions. They have a crucial part to play in the treatment of people with life-threatening conditions, such as cancer and coronary heart disease—two areas that we have established as top priorities for the Government. We are introducing a national service framework for a 10-year modernisation programme for heart disease, mental health and diabetes, all of which require a skilled input from a well-trained scientific work force if diagnosis and treatment are to be effective.

[Mr. John Denham]

For the first time since the NHS was founded, the approach to national service frameworks will give us the opportunity to marry up service, resource and staff planning. We want to ensure that those three processes come together. We will use the national service frameworks and our new work force review as the means of doing so. The work force review is wide-ranging; it will cover scientists and technical support staff and other groups.

As the hon. Gentleman said, many scientists are involved in clinical-based research on new diagnostic techniques and treatments. All have a first degree in science, and often further training, some to masters or doctorate level. There are many distinct specialties such as medical physics, clinical chemistry, microbiology, histopathology and haematology. Those scientists are an important part of the health care team; they carry out tests on samples such as tissues and body fluids from patients to help doctors to diagnose disease and to monitor patients' progress, so that nursing care and drug and other therapies can be tailored to match.

As the hon. Gentleman said, current pay for clinical scientists ranges from £13,000 to £54,000 and for biomedical scientists from £7,400 to £32,000. As he acknowledges, this year's pay offer addresses low pay at the bottom end of the biomedical scientists' pay scale by increasing it to £9,400, a rise of 26 per cent. All scientists have been offered at least 3 per cent., significantly more than inflation, with some offered up to 7 per cent. To tackle special recruitment problems. Some trainees have been offered up to 26 per cent. by restructuring their pay scale.

In addition, London weighting has been increased by 13.5 per cent. to restore it to 1995 values. Given the current circumstances, that is a fair offer. We were right, this year, to target the funds at areas with a demonstrably greater need to address recruitment and retention problems that would have damaged patient care. That is a bigger problem with some staff groups than others.

Across the board, scientists are in a relatively healthy position in comparison with other disciplines—hard-to-fill vacancies lasting over three months account for a vacancy rate of only 1.1 per cent. across the discipline as a whole. However, there is a difficulty in recruiting staff at the bottom end of the biomedical scientist scale. Having recognised that, we have offered larger increases to staff at the end of the profession.

I accept that those figures mask some local variations. London finds recruitment and retention more difficult than other parts of the country. However, local employers already have some flexibility within the national Whitley system to offer pay rates that are attractive enough to get staff with the skills that they need. For example, Whitley contains a provision to offer local pay supplements of up to 30 per cent. in the London area, specifically to address recruitment and retention issues where management consider that proven problems could be redressed by pay enhancement. That and similar action is being taken by London NHS employees, including those at Kingston hospital, in which the hon. Member for Twickenham will have an interest.

The hon. Gentleman acknowledged the wider changes that we are trying to bring about. We know that the current pay system is out of date and in need of review. That is why, on 15 February, we published "Agenda for Change", which sets out detailed proposals for modernising the way in which the NHS rewards its staff. We want to develop a new pay system based on efficiency, fairness, flexibility and partnership. That system must be able to offer all staff better career progression and fairer rewards for taking on extended roles, widening their skills and working in teams; modern conditions of service; and a fair basis for pay increases in the security of a national pay system.

We intend to do that in tandem with considering work force issues from the point of view of the skills that are needed to deliver modern, fast and convenient services to patients. That is long overdue. On the ground, practice is changing. The traditional hard-and-fast demarcations between clinical professions are giving way to more fluid and flexible team working. Now is the right time to be considering the skills that the NHS of the future will need. It is time to examine the issues in a new way—across professions, sectors and services. All clinical groups in the NHS believe that to be necessary in order to ensure that patients get the timely and appropriate care that they need.

As we try to make joined-up decisions on work force requirements, we will have to tackle some of the underlying barriers to change in the current system of pay and conditions of service in the NHS. In too many areas, employment practices in the NHS bear the stamp of 1948 rather than 1999. The NHS needs to become a 21st-century employer. It also needs to become a better employer, not least by offering greater flexibility in the way in which staff are employed. The current pay structure groups staff in ways that are increasingly less relevant to the way in which a modern health service works. Staff are defined by a combination of their titles, their pay and how they are trained, rather than by what they do for patients. Existing conditions of service, which often include a range of arcane allowances built up over many years, too often distort working patterns and inhibit the development of the around-the-clock, flexible services that patients need. Modernising the pay system is therefore one of our key priorities. It will help to deliver the new patient-centred services that both the Government and NHS staff want to see.

The discussions that have taken place so far on our pay proposals have been positive and constructive. A national system of job evaluation will allow creative approaches to job design, to match exactly the redesigned care processes that are so vital to patients.

In talking about the membership of the pay review body, the hon. Gentleman anticipated decisions and conclusions that have not yet been reached. We recognise that there are groups of highly qualified health professional who, for various reasons, are outside the pay review body's remit. That forms part of the talks that are underway with staff and representatives on the basis of "Agenda for Change". Those talks will include discussions about whether any new groups should be covered by the pay review body, but it is not intended that there should be any change to the fundamentally professional character of its coverage. It would be wrong of me to comment at this stage on the proposals that are being made for specific staff groups. However,

I believe that pay modernisation will benefit all NHS staff, whether or not they are covered by a review body. The talks are part of a linked package of discussions and negotiations in which we are working constructively, and with a great deal of common purpose, with all those on the staff side in the NHS.

This is an opportunity to change the pay system for the better, so that staff can be fairly awarded for the work that they do rather than the titles that they hold. It will give us the flexibility to design jobs within the security of a national pay system, giving all staff better career progression and modern terms and conditions and, crucially, allowing managers and staff to deliver the quality of services that everyone wants.

I confirm that, in the course of the constructive discussions that are taking place with the trade unions and the staff side, the MSF—which represents the groups of staff that we have been discussing—is playing a major part in ensuring that the views and aspirations of scientists in the NHS are being played into those discussions. We are working towards radical changes in the NHS, and the necessary changes cannot all take place overnight. If our negotiations are successful, I hope that we will have a fully agreed package by next summer, with implementation starting the following spring.

A modern NHS should mean fair but affordable pay for staff alongside improved modern work practices. That is why our proposals for reform are a key part of the modernisation agenda for the NHS. We want to improve recruitment and retention, through fair rewards and better career progression; improve productivity, through more flexible job design and patterns of working; and improve quality of care, through rewarding the acquisition of better skills rather than applying automatic increments.

I recognise that a substantial portion of what I have said has concerned NHS staff in general rather than scientists in the NHS in particular. However, I am convinced that the correct context in which we should discuss the future pattern of rewards and career progression in the NHS for that group of staff is within those wider changes. We must address the needs of the NHS work force as a whole and those of the NHS as a whole.

I also recognise that, although pay and conditions are important, they are not all that we need to offer to staff, particularly highly qualified staff, to work in the NHS. Alongside our work on the pay system, therefore, is a substantial programme of work to improve the working conditions and environment of NHS staff. The new human resources framework that we have launched requires employers to address other key issues—for example, equality, staff involvement, personal development and the development of personal development plans, good employment practices and healthy workplaces. These will all add to the quality and attractiveness of working life in the NHS.

Many staff are concerned about striking the right balance between work and private life; many have responsibilities to care for dependent relatives. Flexible working arrangements that enable them to discharge those responsibilities and continue with their careers must be developed and encouraged.

We must also ensure that staff have access to reasonable career progression. That is central to the hon. Gentleman's earlier comments. Career pathways must be developed and support must be given for staff to gain relevant skills. That is particularly true in the case of scientific disciplines, where advances in knowledge and technology continually open up new fields of specialisation and create demand for new services. We must grasp that opportunity in order to boost the work force that we want for the 21st century.

To get the work force that is required, we have to get the right calibre of staff into employment and then ensure that they can be retained. Our "Working Together" programme concentrates on better management and better human resources for the entire work force, and that includes scientists and technicians.

Alternative Fuels

12.30 pm

Mr. Fabian Hamilton (Leeds, North-East): I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), coined a phrase some time ago: "joined-up thinking". This debate takes place at an opportune time. First, it is on the topic of the day—transport. Secondly, it is about joined-up thinking and its relationship to the environment.

The Government's transport White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", which was published in July 1998, states:

"We will continue to encourage the use of more environentally friendly fuels".

I should declare an interest at this point. Six weeks ago, I bought a dual-fuel vehicle, which runs on liquefied petroleum gas and petrol. I have been enjoying its benefits ever since, and I shall expand on that later.

The transport issue presents us with a number of problems: how to get around safely and quickly; how to travel longer distances in less time; how to ensure that we do not further pollute our towns and cities, causing damage to people and buildings; and how to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and the greenhouse effect on the whole world. I do not pretend to have all the solutions. However, I shall try to offer some helpful suggestions on how to reach those much-desired targets.

A whole host of alternative vehicle fuels, which offer better economy and less environmental impact than petrol, now exist. Petrol is still the most common vehicle fuel, and, despite the removal of lead, it continues to emit many toxic and undesirable gases. However, the advent of the catalytic converter, and its compulsory addition to all cars manufactured after 1993, has had a dramatic effect on the reduction in harmful gases from petrol-driven cars. Ian McAllister, the chairman and chief executive of Ford UK, is fond of saying that the emissions from 64 new Ford Kas produce the same amount of exhaust gas pollutants as one 1977 model Ford Fiesta. An older bus carrying 30 passengers—or customers, as they seem to be called nowadays—produces more pollution than would be produced if those 30 people were all to drive new small petrol-engine cars. The congestion, of course, would be considerably worse. According to Mr. McAllister, it is almost impossible to commit suicide with a modern petrol engine car—it does not produce enough carbon monoxide.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister launched the Government's transport strategy for the next 10 years. He spoke about investment of £80 billion over that period, and said that he hoped that the entire bus fleet would be replaced in that time. I was amused to hear commentators on the radio deriding him for that—they said that the buses would be replaced within 10 years anyway. Clearly, BBC presenters never travel on buses—if they did, they would know that some of our buses are more than 30 years old, and that their ancient diesel engines cause heavy pollution.

Liquefied petroleum gas—LPG—which is also known as propane, is not new. The gas is a by-product of the oil refining process, and is often burned off in the flares that come out of oil refineries. More than 4 million vehicles on the world's roads run on the fuel, which produces far lower exhaust pollutants. More than 1 million of those cars are in Italy, where the tax regime has been even more favourable to the gas. In Holland, which is a much smaller country than the UK, there are 400,000 LPG cars on the roads. Fewer than 8,000 such vehicles are driven on Britain's roads.

LPG is a good alternative fuel, although it is by no means the only one available. It reduces the production of nitrous oxide by up to 85 per cent., carbon monoxide by 98 per cent. and hydrocarbons by 81 per cent. Carbon dioxide is also significantly reduced when compared with petrol. Benzene and butadiene are dangerous human carcinogens. LPG produces one thirteenth of the benzene and half the butadiene emissions of petrol.

Having realised the environmental benefits of LPG, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor reduced excise duty on the fuel in his last Budget. The typical forecourt cost for LPG is 35p per litre, compared with more than 75p for petrol—it is probably much more in London. It is no wonder that I am delighted with my new Vauxhall Vectra. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be aware, however, nobody is ever satisfied on tax. I appeal to him to reduce further the duty on the fuel from the current rate of 15p per litre to the European Union minimum of 8.3p. That would further stimulate the market for a gas that is readily available now and that most petrol engines can be converted to accommodate.

Although I described LPG as readily available, one of the most frequently asked questions about my dual-fuel car is, "But where can you fill it up?" I am lucky to come from Leeds, which is a city overflowing with LPG filling stations—four, to be precise. That is far better than London, although there is a convenient garage nearby at Victoria coach station. Many Members of Parliament will remember the early days of the fax machine, about 15 years ago, when people asked, "Why should anyone buy a fax machine?" There seemed little point in doing so if there was no one to whom one could send a fax, as—although it seems incredible now—few people possessed a machine.

The author Joseph Heller, who died on Sunday, will be for ever remembered as the author of "Catch-22". I am not sure whether he would have called LPG a catch-22 problem, but one of the barriers to wholesale conversion to LPG is the lack of infrastructure. There are only 200 filling stations nationwide, although many more are planned by Calor Autogas, Shell and BP over the next 12 months. Among the biggest problems facing the development of more LPG stations are the objections of local planning authorities. Petrol storage tanks are kept underground, but LPG storage tanks must be kept on the surface, and local planning authorities have objected on safety or aesthetic grounds.

On 25 September this year, the *Financial Times* reported that Dean White, clean fuels manager for BP Amoco, said:

"The government on the one hand is encouraging use of cleaner fuel, but local authorities are saying 'not in our backyard'."

The report continued:

"BP Amoco has hoped to install LPG facilities at 70 filling stations this year. So far it has received planning consent for just three. Shell has cut its target for LPG sites from 100 to about 60 by

the year end . . .BP has set a target of providing LPG at 300 filling stations within five years. Officials admitted it was unlikely to achieve that target. Shell, similarly, said it was taking longer than expected to win planning consent. It had hoped to launch 200 sites by 2001."

It would greatly assist the planned target of 500 clean refuelling points by 2001, which is the aim of Calor, Shell and BP, if the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions would issue a circular to all local planning authorities encouraging them to approve applications within local framework plans. That would be a step towards joined-up government.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor generously funds the Energy Saving Trust and its Powershift programme, which aims to assist in converison of vehicles to cleaner fuels. He recently announced three-year funding for the programme, but budgets are already under pressure because of the heavy demand for and massive increase in interest in sustainable clean fuels—not only LPG. I shall add to that burden by telling the House that grants of up to 75 per cent. may be paid towards the conversion of petrol-engine cars by approved conversion companies. That normally involves the removal of the spare wheel and the use of that space to accommodate the new fuel tank, which is a small price to pay for the cleanliness of the fuel.

As most conversions cost between £1,500 and £1,800, the cost borne by the individual—assuming a grant from the Energy Saving Trust—would be recouped in a few months. For companies operating fleets, the cost savings alone would justify the relatively small investment, irrespective of the environmental benefits. Ford, Vauxhall and Peugeot currently offer new cars already converted by the manufacturer.

So far, I have talked about LPG, which is also known as propane, but there are other options. Larger vehicles—buses, refuse wagons and lorries—can run on compressed natural gas, which further reduces polluting gas emissions. The one disadvantage is the size and weight of the fuel tank. CNG, which requires a compression of eight atmospheres, must be stored in very heavy fuel tanks that are impractical for cars, but a number of local authorities have converted to CNG and are already feeling the benefits. Perhaps local authority electorates should press councils to make those conversions, especially in heavily built-up areas such as London and Leeds. I invite the Minister for Local Government and the Regions to make provision for this very good bit of joined-up government.

Last January, I chaired a conference at the Royal Armouries in Leeds, on behalf of the Energy Saving Trust, that sought to persuade public bodies to convert to cleaner fuels. At the conference, I had the opportunity to drive an electric car—the Peugeot 105. A fleet of Peugeot 105s has recently been purchased by Birmingham city council. I thought that that car, which produces no emissions, was the answer to the problems. Like most hon. Members, I suspect, I imagined that driving an electric car would be just like driving a milk float, but I was pleasantly surprised. Although it has no gears, it has good acceleration and is totally silent. I wondered whether it was the ideal solution, but there are problems.

First, on a single charge, its range is only about 40 miles. Secondly, in producing the electricity that charges the vehicle's batteries, pollution is created in other places. Thirdly, the batteries use heavy metals that are not very environmentally friendly. However, if we were to use electricity generated by wind farms, or sustainable sources such as hydro-electricity, perhaps such vehicles would be cleaner.

The car is also expensive, but the French—inevitably, it is the French—have established a network of recharging points that recharge much more quickly than conventional ones. The electric car has a little further to go before it is a viable long-distance vehicle, but it has a role to play in inner-city areas, where range is not an issue. I aplaud Birmingham for buying a fleet of such cars, and I hope that Leeds quickly follows suit.

So far, I have not made much mention of diesel, which was the great hope for emission reduction. There are many diesel cars and goods vehicles on our roads, and huge advances have been made in diesel design, emissions and power. Diesel engines are far more economical, and the latest common-rail diesel engines are often indistinguishable from petrol engines. One can even buy a diesel BMW. However, cyclists know that diesel-engine buses produce the filthiest exhaust emissions. Although they help to reduce carbon dioxide, such vehicles produce particulates of unburnt fuel, which are the real killers. High levels of PM10s, which are the larger particulates, contribute to congestive heart failure, ischaemic heart disease, cerebrovascular problems and asthmatic attacks. It is estimated that PM10s advance 8,100 deaths a year, so it is clear that a reduction in older, dirty diesels can only benefit the people of this country, as well as health service costs. There are other, smaller particulates—PM25s—that are even more dangerous because they can be absorbed into the bloodstream more directly. A reduction in those particulates would also greatly benefit public health.

I have not had time to mention some of the other available fuels. The larger motor manufacturers are developing hydrogen fuel cell technology. Ford estimates that, within five years, it will make a fuel cell car available to the public. Fuel cell cars use biomass-produced fuels such as methanol, which is converted into hydrogen and burned in an internal combustion engine, and produce exhaust fumes that are purely steam or water vapour. I understand that Brazil uses a great deal of methanol. Such technologies are being encouraged and developed.

I have hardly had time to touch on the issue of capital allowances. I know that the debate will not be answered by a Treasury Minister, and I apologise for raising taxation issues, but I want to make one point. The conversion to LPG of vehicles, particularly fleet vehicles and large commercial vehicles, would be greatly assisted not only by developing the vital infrastructure but by introducing 100 per cent. capital write-down for such conversion. When Treasury Ministers read this debate in *Hansard*, I hope that they will consider advancing alternative fuels in that way.

I have raised a number of issues this afternoon. I hope that they will contribute to the debate on cleaner and better fuels to reduce pollution, improve air quality in inner cities and reduce carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases, in line with our obligations under the Kyoto agreements. I also hope that, as they become more common, those alternative fuels will help to improve public health and reduce NHS costs, as well as reduce the damage that sulphur dioxide emissions cause to our buildings. I believe that the issues I have raised are important. Conversion to LPG and other such fuels will

[Mr. Fabian Hamilton]

not only lead to cost savings for motorists, but benefit the environment and public health, about which I care passionately.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton) on securing this debate, and on giving notice of some of the key issues that he has raised. Alternative fuels is a subject of extensive interest, and the related issues deserve to be widely aired. We are now aware that, as an owner of an LPG bi-fuel vehicle, my hon. Friend has a particular interest in the subject. He is not alone: the Government car service converts its fleet to alternative fuels as vehicles are replaced, and my own ministerial car has been converted to gas.

Now, more than ever before, we need a consensus on transport. We do not want to force people out of their cars or force hauliers out of business, but every sensible person who participates in the transport debate recognises that we cannot go on as we are. Congestion is costing the country billions of pounds, climate change is the greatest threat that the world faces today, and we are increasingly aware of the impact of poor air quality on health.

Instead of wringing our hands over those problems, we must start solving them. The integrated transport White Paper, which was published last year, and the recently published Transport Bill are important steps towards providing solutions, but we cannot afford to be complacent. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister set out the way forward for transport over the next 10 years. As he explained, we need an efficient transport system to support a prosperous economy, counter social exclusion and maintain our quality of life. We need greater investment from the private sector and the pubilc sector. Part of the answer is to improve public transport, but we recognise that the car will remain an important means of mobility for millions of people, so we must ensure that road vehicles are cleaner, quieter and more fuel-efficient.

Here, there is good news. As a result of tighter vehicle emission and fuel quality standards, new road vehicles are already cleaner. As manufacturers gear up to meet the European Union voluntary agreements on new car fuel efficiency, vehicles will quickly become more fuel-efficient. In some areas, that will not be enough. Everyone recognises the scale of the problem posed by climate change, and noise is an issue of increasing concern. Although our health-based air quality standards will be met across the majority of the country by the deadlines set out in our air quality strategy, there will be pollution hot-spots, especially for nitrogen dioxide and particulates. Alternative fuels provide one way of addressing those problems.

Gas fuels can offer significant air quality benefits. Compared with diesel engines, liquefied petroleum gas and compressed natural gas can offer substantial benefits with regard to particulates and nitrogen oxides, which are the air pollutants of greatest concern in road transport terms. Road fuel gases produce less visible smoke and odour than diesel, and such vehicles can be substantially quieter than their diesel counterparts. That can benefit night deliveries of goods, for example. If one takes into account life cycle, rather than tail-pipe emissions alone, CO_2 emissions from those fuels will be lower than from petrol.

Battery-electric vehicles, which produce no exhaust pipe emissions, are even better than gas fuel vehicles in that regard. However, we must remember that, essentially, those emissions will be transferred to power stations. None the less, on a life-cycle basis, battery electrics may benefit the climate and improve local air quality. Hybrid electric vehicles can be significantly more fuel-efficient and quieter than their conventionally fuelled counterparts. Potentially, fuel cells offer virtually non-existent tail-pipe emissions and life cycle benefits in respect of CO_2.

I should like to explain our approach to deciding between different policy measures. Solutions have to contain three elements. They have to be practical, timely and cost-effective. It is the duty of every responsible Government to ensure that taxpayers' money is carefully spent, and this area is no exception.

The Government fully support alternative fuels. We have introduced fiscal incentives for gas fuels, so that the difference in duty between liquefied petroleum gas—LPG—and compressed natural gas and diesel is the widest in Europe. This year we increased the funding to the Powershift programme, which provides grants to help fleet operators to offset the additional capital cost of alternatively fuelled vehicles, by 40 per cent. compared with last year. In the last Budget we doubled the vehicle excise duty rate for the cleanest buses and lorries to a maximum of £1,000.

Projects and initiatives at a local level are already starting to make a difference. The ALTER project is designed to produce concerted action by cities across Europe to give preferential access to certain areas to vehicles with zero or low emissions. Some local authorities are discussing the possibility of using low emission zones to reduce vehicle-related pollution in towns and cities. It is likely that gas-powered vehicles will fall into the categories of vehicles allowed to enter such zones, because they tend to be significantly cleaner than their conventionally fuelled counterparts.

Local authorities and other public sector fleets are at the forefront of pushing forward the market for alternative fuels. The London borough of Southwark in London, for example, is involved in the ZEUS—zero and low emission vehicles in urban society—project. That is a consortium of local authorities in London, Coventry and other European cities examining the use of cleaner fuels and technologies to improve air quality and promote energy efficiency. It has negotiated competitive prices for a range of electric vehicles. The City of Westminster council has just taken delivery of the first commercial fuel cell vehicle, for which the Powershift programme, sponsored by my Department, provided a partial grant.

Police forces have also shown their keenness to use alternative fuels. Humberside police in Yorkshire, for example, were awarded Powershift funding for more than 100 LPG vehicles at the end of last year. I am delighted to report that Leeds city council, which is certainly in Yorkshire, has been offered a Powershift grant towards the purchase of two electric vans.

However, the debate should not be limited to gas fuels. Battery-electric vehicles have a role to play in niche markets. More exciting are the alternative fuels and technologies of the future. Hybrid electric vehicles use two power sources: a conventional engine and an electric motor. They are, therefore, substantially more fuel-efficient than conventional technology. Hybrids are already on sale in some parts of the world, and we can expect to see them here in the next few months.

Fuel cell vehicles offering high efficiency and low emissions are slightly further into the future, but will be on the roads in the next few years. It is no exaggeration to say that the way in which vehicles are powered will have changed more in the last 10 years of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, than in the 90 years before that. Who would have thought, looking at the first steam-powered vehicles of the 1890s, that 100 years later we would be contemplating the sleek, clean, quiet fuel cell vehicles of the near future?

Those dramatic advances are being supported by the Government. Through the fuel cell programme, we are supporting research and development on advanced fuel cells to the tune of £2 million, with that amount being matched by industry. So far, we have supported 109 projects with a total value of about £56 million. We expect the next phase of the project to support around 15 proposals with a Government contribution of around £3 million.

The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council has recently approved a number of fuel cell projects under its new and renewable energy programme. The Foresight vehicle programme, aiming at the 15 to 20-year horizon, is a further example of Government-sponsored research. It is an umbrella programme of industry-led automotive research that aims to co-ordinate Government funding across Whitehall, focusing on advanced technologies for the future. The programme has proved a great success and includes projects investigating advanced propulsion systems and innovative fuel systems. Hybrid and electric vehicle technologies are also included. The Government have made more than £12 million available for these and other Foresight projects. The portfolio continues to increase as the programme moves forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East has suggested that vehicle excise duty should be based on a wider range of environmental impacts. Taxation is, of course, a matter for the Chancellor, who has said that he will announce full details on graduated VED at the next Budget. Meanwhile, I am sure that he will keenly read the observations made by my hon. Friend. He has already said that there will be four VED bands, based on CO_2 emissions, with the potential to reward less polluting fuels. The system developed by the Environment Agency is interesting, and my officials have had discussions about that system.

It is important that the Government take into account all the environmental impacts of particular fuels. However, we are not yet at the stage where we can adopt a fully comprehensive system. Many uncertainties remain about the exact life-cycle emissions of different fuels and technologies. That is one reason why my Department, through the cleaner vehicles task force, has commissioned research to assess how much information is already available about the life-cycle emissions of different fuels and vehicles.

I said earlier that the solutions to the problems of poor air quality, noisy streets and the threat of climate change must be practical, timely and cost-effective. We cannot afford simply to assume that alternative fuels are the way forward. We have, therefore, asked the cleaner vehicles task force to take a closer look at alternative fuels. We asked the alternative fuels sub-group of the task force to do three things: to consider the merits and longer-term potential of alternative fuels and technologies; to examine the barriers to introducing alternative fuels to the marketplace; and to consider the mechanisms for removing those barriers and developing an improved infrastructure to make those fuels more widely available. We have stressed that this work must be set within the context of practicability, timeliness and cost-effectiveness.

The group is near to delivering a final report, which we expect to publish early next year. Cost-effectiveness analysis has been a key parameter to its work. When we receive the task force's recommendations, we will use them further to refine Government policy on alternative fuels. I do not anticipate a major change to our current belief that, from an environmental perspective, the best use of gas fuels is in urban areas to replace vehicles that would otherwise use diesel. We hope to ensure that those fleets are given every opportunity to switch from diesel. Hybrid electric and fuel cell technologies are likely to become more widely applicable, especially as one of their major benefits will be in the area of CO_2 emissions, which are a global rather than a local issue.

Another issue raised by my hon. Friend is that of problems experienced by some fuel suppliers in obtaining planning permission for new LPG refuelling sites. My Department is aware of that issue. It is important that local authorities take their planning and health and safety responsibilities seriously, but we must bear in mind the contribution that gas fuels can make to meeting our air quality targets. I can, therefore, promise that we will address the issue of planning guidelines for LPG refuelling points in the final version of PPG13—the Department's planning policy guidance on transport issues to be published next year.

I end by re-emphasising our commitment to alternative fuels. We cannot continue to use energy in the way that we have, or to ask those who are suffering from respiratory problems to suffer further as a result of traffic-related pollution. We firmly believe that alternative fuels and technologies are part of the answer in creating a sustainable transport system. The role of the different fuels and technologies varies—some are best suited to niche applications, others are more widely applicable. However, we have no doubt that they must be part of our strategy for delivering a transport system suitable for the next century.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 December 1999

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

"Sharing the Nation's Prosperity"

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): We are here this morning to discuss the Cabinet Office report "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity". The report is a landmark in the discussion of regional needs and problems, and the Government programmes and spending that attempt to deal with them. We all know that society is extremely divided. We are now in a city where people are jamming switchboards to buy internet stocks, yet it is also a city where there is a low rate of investment in new technology. We are now in a city with sharp divisions between neighbourhoods. For instance, Hackney has some of the worst deprivation in Britain, yet it is only a short bus ride away from some of the greatest explosions of wealth on the continent.

I am conscious that many of my hon. Friends are here today to discuss the north-east of England, because the situation there is different. Not one family in the north-east is untouched by the brutal facts set out in the report. That is not the result of a temporary swing in economic activity. It is not the result of the closure of a single factory or of an industry. It cannot be addressed by a task force or a sprinkle of worthy Government initiatives.

The problems for the north-east that are highlighted in the report have very deep roots. They affect the way of life and the thinking of the people of the north-east. Nobody in the north-east ever feels confident of job or income, and it will be so for years to come. That affects planning for the future; it affects the start-up of businesses; and it affects people's thinking about their own and their families' future.

People in the north-east have made huge efforts to adapt and to come to terms with the facts that are set out in the document. There are many disappointments, despite the efforts that ordinary people have made. Some of the problems are well known to us. My hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) has had to grapple with the problems caused by the closure of Siemens. Others are grappling with the difficulties of the offshore oil industry, which the report claims to be a growing industry. The pattern of problems feeds on itself, and it will require years of calculated, determined and systematic action to deal with it.

I do not intend to spend much time speaking about statistics, but, for those who represent the north-east, the indicators in the report are part of the ordinary week-by-week experience for us and our constituents. Among English regions, the north-east of England has the lowest economic activity, the lowest gross domestic product per head, the lowest earnings, the lowest household incomes and the lowest rate of registration for VAT for new businesses. It has the second lowest number of income support claimants and the second lowest rating for educational achievement and attainment—a crucial indicator. It is the region in the United Kingdom with the lowest take-up of vocational qualifications, the lowest business-base formation, the greatest unemployment and the lowest employment rates. The difference between the north-east and the south-east, means that one in six people of working age are not in the labour market. That capacity and potential are not available to serve our community and our people.

With that goes the ridiculous social stress of London and the south-east—the overcrowding, the poor quality of life and the other difficult and intractable problems that require so much Government action. Only yesterday, I was present at a parliamentary Committee, and heard the Chancellor say that it would cost between £14 billion and £16 billion to solve the problems of the London Underground. The cost of relieving stress in London and the south-east is paid twice over by the north-east. First, we help to pay for it. Secondly, if that economic activity were taking place in our region, not only would we benefit directly, but the cost to the south-east would be so much lower. Sharing the nation's prosperity is fundamental to maintaining the broader welfare of life, not only in the north-east but in London and the south-east. That will require sustained long-term action. We cannot leave it to market forces. Nor can we leave it to the tweaking of market forces. That simply will not work.

I ask the Government to bear in mind the following points. First, we need to set regional spending and performance targets, so that we can measure regional progress towards a benchmark to which all regions can aspire. Secondly, a needs assessment should be made of the English regions, and of the other nations that form the United Kingdom, that puts consideration of regional problems, needs and spending on a common base. We could thus ensure that the regions and nations of Britain achieved the common objectives set out in the report.

The north-east obviously needs a substantial increase in health spending. It has the worst health experience in the United Kingdom, except for Scotland. We need a substantial increase in health spending, and I look to the Cabinet Office to work with the Department of Health to ensure that those needs are met on a regional basis. However, we must bear in mind the fact that the health regions are not the same as the regional areas used in the report.

The north-east has the lowest educational achievement anywhere in Britain, but there is no regional element in the work of the Department for Education and Employment; it has no regionally based programmes or assessments. If we are to have joined-up government, and if we are to tackle the deep-rooted patterns of low educational achievement of which our communities are the victims, we need a regional element in the work of the Department for Education and Employment.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): On that point, surely if there were some proper regional assessment within the Department for Education and Employment, action would have to be taken to deal with low educational funding in the counties of

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

Northumerland and Durham. Both counties have a very low level of educational take-up compared to the nation as a whole.

Mr. Cousins: I suspect that every part of the north-east would benefit from such an assessment. I would not care to single out the counties of Durham or Northumberland, although I am well aware of some of the difficulties that Northumberland faces because of the low density of its population and the large geographical area that has to be covered.

We must consider another point. The Government, in the White Paper on regional development, describe our region as "peripheral". I look to the Government to ensure that we have at least one motorway connection to the south, which we do not have now, and one dual carriageway connection to the north, which we do not have now.We would then be rather less peripheral.

Above all, the regional development agency needs a substantial amount of money to regenerate the communities of the north-east and to take advantage of the Government's programme for setting up new enterprise. To have one law for the lion and for the ox is oppressive. To treat every region equally in the promotion of new enterprise will be to the advantage of those regions that already have a stronger business base than we have in the north-east. Strong and special measures must be taken if the north-east is to achieve equality in the creation of new businesses.

The Government have created a huge agenda for themselves. It is set out in the White Paper "Building Partnerships for Prosperity", in which the Deputy Prime Minister said:

"Throughout my political career I have argued that the English regions are crucial to this inclusive approach."

That approach is intended to tackle the environment and our quality of life, and to modernise and achieve sustainable development. He continued:

"Our vision is for the English regions to grow and prosper, alongside Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom and within the European Union."

We need the right information so that we can measure whether that agenda is being achieved.

In the preface to that White Paper, the Prime Minister, who represents a constituency in the north-east, said:

"I want the people of each of England's regions to have better opportunities to contribute to the prosperity of their own communities".

That is absolutely right. We in the north-east of England do not want permanent welfare dependency. We want a platform and programme of Government action that will permanently lift us out of structural welfare dependence and enable our people to play a full part in British society, as they want and need to do. That will contribute to the well-being of national society.

Our people must believe that they can prosper and shape the destiny of their region without constantly depending on decisions, including those on Government budgets down to fine-grain detail, taken in Westminster and Whitehall. It is time to support regions such as the north-east more strongly and to enable our people to be free to take part in British society, which they want to do. That will relieve many of the difficulties in other regions, which suffer the opposite end of the problems that our people suffer. That is a great agenda, and we ask the Government to take steps to put it into practice.

9.43 am

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): I shall not take too much time, because I made a speech on the north-south divide in the debate on the Queen's Speech not so long ago and I do not want to repeat myself.

The report, entitled "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity" was produced in five days. I was sceptical about that because I thought that it would be a whitewash—just a push-off that had been dreamt up and put on paper. We thought that the report was intended to soften us up, but we have now read it and its findngs are worse than we thought; they reinforce our case.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) has said, we are dealing with the north-south divide, and we have seen the problem before. I shall not knock the Scots today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you are in the Chair. I shall take it easy. The Barnett formula was devised many years ago to help Wales and especially Scotland, which was going through a bad patch. It helped Scotland and got it going, especially in terms of education, health, jobs and prosperity.

There are big differences between the regions. People have said that the gap is closing, but not according to the figures that I have seen, which show enormous regional differences. In *The Journal*, the local Newcastle paper, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) compared education in Berwick with that in a little town just over the border in Scotland. The Scottish school received much more money than the one in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency did. Any Government who allow such unfair differences to continue are not doing their job.

I do not want to take money from the Scots. Geordies never want to take money from anyone. I am sure that you have a lot of money, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I do not want to take it from you. All that we in the north-east are saying is that the formula was good enough for Scotland when it was on its knees, so we should receive similar help. We never said that we wanted what the Scots were getting. We were all right in those days; we had pits and shipyards, and the north-east was not a bad place to be. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central said, at least we knew that we had a job. We thought that jobs in the pits were for life, until Margaret Thatcher decided otherwise.

What does the report mean for us? What will it do for the north-east? When will the proposals be implemented? The report is very good; it goes a long way to help our case, but how will the Government help us? I hear rumours that the Government will look at the north-east and say, "Well, there are some good pockets in the north-east and some bad ones." I have the funniest feeling that they will throw a little money here and there and say, "Get on with it. That's all you are going to get", yet the Barnett formula will not be touched. The formula will stay in place because the Prime Minister does not have the bottle to change it given the Scottish situation. The Scottish nationalists are breathing down the Government's neck.

Unfortunately for us, there is no fourth party in the north-east; we have only the Liberals. Only one Tory Member is here in the Chamber. The Liberals are on our backs. If people in the north-east become disillusioned with the Government, they will go to the Liberals. Fine; the Prime Minister might love to see a Liberal in my seat rather than me. He works with them now, so he might work with one better than with me.

The problem is that we need extra cash in the north-east. The Barnett formula must be changed. I am not knocking people in Scotland, but we should get the same as them. We are on our knees. Our shipbuilding, mining and other industries have gone. Elleton pit is on the brink and may close in the new year. We want something to replace those industries. We need help not only in industry but in education, and the Government's five-day wonder report proves our point.

9.48 am

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): The longer I spend in the House, the more I begin to agree with the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell). I agree with him that the Prime Minister would not have the bottle to revise the Barnett formula. In recent weeks, people have concentrated on the Barnett formula, but doing so is a waste of time. The Government's response at yesterday's Scottish questions shows that they are more concerned with keeping the Scottish National party at bay than with anything else. That is why the Barnett formula will not be reformed.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): Did the previous Administration ever consider changing the Barnett formula?

Mr. Atkinson: I shall answer that point later, and I hope that the hon. Lady will be patient.

The only way to increase funding for the north-east is to take money away from the south. However, the Government will not do that, given Labour's marginal seats in the south. I am afraid that the five-day wonder report, "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity", is more Downing street spin that anything else. As has been said, the report took five days to produce and it is only a mishmash of old statistics pulled together in a binder.

The statistics on the north-east given in the report are out of date. It talks about unemployment going down—in fact, it is going up. The Prime Minister's press secretary, whose name we cannot mention, talked about hysteria in the local media over the north-south divide. The north-south divide is as old as the hills, but has been made worse in recent years with the decline of the heavy manufacturing industries, while the south has boomed under the growth of high-tech and financial services. We are continually seen to be knocking the north, which is a great pity. One of our problems is convincing people who live south of Watford that we have some good things going for us in the north. As long as we appear a begging-bowl economy, it is harder to attract inward investment and people into the region.

The north has a great deal going for it. It has spectacular landscapes and coastline, in many respects a high quality of life, relatively traffic-free roads, an industrious, hard-working and innovative population, some splendid cities—such as Newcastle upon Tyne, which is one of the most spectacular cities in the country—and wonderful growth in its higher education sector: more than 70,000 students go to the north-east to learn, and that would be a wonderful resource for the region if only it were properly capitalised on. The fastest-growing industry is tourism and there is much to do to build that up.

The blame, if I may put it that way, for the growing north-south divide can be put on the policies introduced by the Government since the last election. It is worth considering what they have done. The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) laughs, but one has to remember—he probably does not know the north-east—that it is a big, rural, peripheral area, as it has been described. So what do the Government do? They hike petrol tax up to one of the highest levels ever—the highest level in Europe. How does that help an area that depends on cars and on tourism?

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Does the hon. Gentleman not recall that the only time in recent years that the north-south divide reduced was during the disastrous recession of 1990–92 when the south, for almost the first time in the past 100 years, suffered as much as, or perhaps even more than, the north? That was under the hon. Gentleman's Government, and they did not want it to happen.

Mr. Atkinson: There was a recession at that time and the south suffered, but I do not understand what bearing that has on what I am saying. Government policies, such as the increase in petrol duty in an area that depends on the motor car, are strangling local enterprise. The hotel and tourism industry is already having to deal with a strong pound; why be handicapped by making our petrol the most expensive fuel in Europe?

The countryside depends on agriculture—look what the Government have done to it. Agricultural incomes are the lowest that they have ever been. The beauty and prosperity of rural Britain depend on the prosperity of farming. More smoke and mirrors emerged from the Select Committee on Agriculture only yesterday, when it was announced that the Government's aid package to farmers would amount not to £500 million, as was trailed, but to £1 million.

We also have some of the highest council taxes in the country. Is it not idiocy that a person living in an average, three-bedroomed semi-detached house in Newcastle upon Tyne pays more council tax than someone who owns a £35 million house in Kensington? That situation has arisen because we have inefficient local authorities, which have been responsible for so much of the trouble in towns in the north-east. Local councillors in the north-east prefer to spend their time squabbling with one another and stabbing one another in the back, rather than getting on with cleaning up the cities and dealing with the sink schools and low educational expectation that we have in Newcastle.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): The hon. Gentleman is not being fair to the councillors in the north-east. Does he not concede that for two years running the best unitary authority anywhere in England has been in the north-east, in South Tyneside? In spite of the highest unemployment in the UK and worse than average deprivation, the north-east has some well-run local authorities, of which South Tyneside is a good example.

Mr. Atkinson: One has only to look at the evidence of one's own eyes and of the reports to see the low

[Mr. Atkinson]

educational achievements—the local authority is responsible for the schools—and one has only to walk around Newcastle, which is one of the most spectacular cities in England, to see the litter blowing around and the dereliction in part of the west end, which was once one of the finest residential areas in the city. Local authorities have considerable responsibility for some of the conditions in the north-east.

I also wish to mention the health tax that has now been imposed on us. As we see in the report, the north-east has some of the worst health problems in the country. Health action zones have recently been set up, which we hope will improve that situation. However, with sleight of hand, the Treasury has changed the way that health authorities are funded; they now have to carry all the burden of their drug costs. That will cost my local authority perhaps £2 million a year from its budget and that will be reproduced throughout the north-east, which will mean that we will not be able to develop the health action zones, which have already been set up, unless they receive extra funding.

Mr. Cousins: It is a pity that you are using this occasion to make a lot of rather unfortunate local party political points. Would you not accept that the 20 years of Conservative government, which underpins so much of the information in the report, so much of the dereliction of Newcastle's west end, for example, and so much of the social stress that constitutes the poor health experience of the region, might also have something to do with the problems that we are discussing?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: May I just say before we proceed that the hon. Gentleman's use of "you" implies that he is speaking to the Chair? Even his hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) did not involve the Chair in his arguments about the Scots.

Mr. Cousins: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The atmosphere is so much like an urban district council that I am reverting to type.

Mr. Atkinson: I agree. It has been called the Westminster parish council; I do not know whether that is a little unfair.

I agree in part with what the hon. Gentleman says, but many of the conditions of the city have been made substantially worse by the housing policies operated over the years by Newcastle city council. I think that that is self-evident. The north-east has also not been helped by the planning system and by ministerial delays on planning. One of the things that developers and entrepreneurs in the region complain about is how hard it is to get planning applications through. The classic example is the one in my constituency with the plan to build a virtual reality centre at Stannington in Northumberland, which was lost because of the Minister's refusal to make a decision on the planning application. By the time that the Minister had decided to go against the decision of the inspector who had recommended approval for the plan, the funding for the project, which could ultimately have created 2,000 jobs, had gone and the scheme was dropped.

How do the Government's abolition of the Northumberland and Tyneside training and enterprise councils and their creation of something called skills and learning councils help the region? The Northumberland TEC has been at the forefront of introducing new skills in its area, but it has been abolished and replaced with a body on a sub-regional basis. How does that help? The creation of the regional development agencies was also damaging for the region. Before them, we had the development councils, which were specialist bodies in areas such as the north-east that needed special treatment and special development. The whole country now has regional development agencies and it is obvious that the chairman of the regional development agency in the south-east is saying, "We have problems down here and we want to keep more of our money at home and not spread it around the country." The regional development agency will ultimately do more to harm than to help the region. I imply by that no criticism of Dr. John Bridge, for whom I have the highest admiration, who is the chairman of the regional development agency in the north-east, but I would have preferred him to stay at the Northern Development Company, which did a first-class job for the north-east.

The north-east also has poor road infrastructure. We have had no news about taking the M1 up to Newcastle, and we still have the threat in the countryside of a pesticides tax and an aggregates tax, which will damage quarrying, opencast mining and farming.

I urge on the Minister some solutions to the problems. First, I urge him not to increase the price of petrol, because that would be extremely damaging in a region such as the north-east of England. Secondly, I ask him to introduce a scheme to provide some relief for hauliers on the duty that they pay. In rural areas, transport is everything, and increasing diesel costs increases all costs. He should also follow the advice of the Leader of the Opposition to abolish RDAs and replace them with a new development company, returning to the idea of the Tyne and Wear and the Teesside development corporations. Hon. Members have interrupted me to refer to the Government's record. The creation and funding of those two development corporations—I realise that local councillors did not approve of them—by the Conservative Government, by short-circuiting local government in the north-east, did more than any other measure to improve the environment of the north-east.

Proper funding should be provided to deal with sparsity. Time and again—I accept that when we were in government it was the same—we have not succeeded in making the case that sparsity, especially in education, roads and social services, should be properly funded. That would help. We should also have more enterprise zones—another successful Conservative innovation which continues to prove extremely successful—and less regulation which strangles the farming industry and new enterprise. We do not have enough local businesses. The north-east of England needs more service industries. Every time that the Government introduce a measure such as the working time directive, the national minimum wage or the social chapter, they increase the burden on business and make it increasingly hard to develop the necessary new industries.

We need some commitment from the Government, who have produced six Cabinet Ministers who represent the north-east—the three Bs: Brown, Blair and Byers;

and the three Ms: Mandelson, Mowlam and Milburn. When the Conservatives were in power, we did not have even one, but the Conservative Government were more committed to the north-east than are the current Labour Government with their six Cabinet Ministers.

10.2 am

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland East): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on securing the debate. Debate on the north-south divide has been going on for as long as I can remember.

I shall say a few words about the definition of poverty and the appropriate political instrument for tackling poverty, which have a bearing on the broader issue of regional disparities. I shall also outline the structural nature of some of those disparities and how they affect my constituents.

The Cabinet Office report released last week was timely, foreshadowing a detailed study conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on patterns of poverty in this country that are linked to social and geographical circumstances. I hope that we shall have an opportunity some time in future, perhaps in this new innovative debating Chamber, to discuss the Rowntree report and its implications for tackling social exclusion and powerlessness.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was correct in adducing that pockets of poverty exist in the south-east and that problems are experienced in parts of London. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central said, estates and communities just a few miles from this place have levels of unemployment equivalent to some of the worst in the areas that we represent in the north-east.

Unemployment and poverty must be tackled and eradicated wherever they occur, and I support any initiative to breathe new life into such communities in areas such as north Kent or the estates of Southwark, Newham and Hackney which suffer from joblessness. However, the problem is that we are not comparing like with like. I accept that there is high unemployment in the Medway towns, for example, but Kent has benefited as a centre for logistics following the opening of the Channel tunnel. Similarly, there is high unemployment in some of east and south London's inner-city estates, but they are located a short bus or tube journey from two of the greatest generators of jobs and investment in the United Kingdom—the cities of London and Westminster. Government programmes for those areas should therefore be geared to job connect schemes and employability projects—to fitting the unemployed to jobs that match their aspirations, to heightening people's competence to fit those jobs and to creating intensive, intermediate labour-market projects, schemes that will flower and help people achieve employed status, and schemes that contract with private companies based in the heart of the city.

For our region it is different. Although pockets of prosperity exist, they are small pockets in a very large overcoat. Quite simply, for our unemployed people, jobs remain unavailable in any real quantity. Indeed, the jobs that are available are, as often as not, poorly paid, and too often of low quality.

Over the years, job-hunting agencies have achieved much. New plants in the region, such as those created by firms such as Samsung, Nissan and LG, are welcome, but must be set against an employment topography that has been affected by the death of the coal mining industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) mentioned, and vast job losses in the steel, shipbuilding and heavy engineering industries. Indeed, some of the newer industries in our region have yet to achieve critical mass. Although Nissan is probably the UK's leading-edge car manufacturer, firms such as Samsung have yet to achieve the full employment potential that was promised.

On the Tyne and the Tees, many former shipyard workers found work with the arrival of new orders for the offshore industry, which needed their skills and talents. However, that industry, too, is no longer in good shape. Years of low oil prices and the gradual depletion of the North sea oil fields have left many yards without orders. Many yards have been mothballed, and the men have been laid off.

Throughout the north-east, and especially in my region of Teesside, we still bear the scars of our past. Those scars are deep, and were formed under a previous Government. They affect entire communities. In many—indeed, most—communities we may have lower unemployment figures than two or three years ago. However, the figures for people deemed "economically inactive"—people who are unemployed, ill or drawing incapacity benefit—show that, in many communities, such people constitute the largest minority. Such communities co-exist with other communities in which joblessness is lower and other social factors are better, but even those communities fare far worse than many of their southern equivalents. Areas such as the north-east need a regional strategy to create jobs and train people for those jobs. The south needs a regional strategy to overcome unsustainable overheating and help jobless people adapt to a vigorous labour market. Those are two different approaches for two distinct areas. They are not in competition, but complementary.

There is a lot of loose talk about the north-south divide. It does exist, and anyone who tries to pretend otherwise is flying in the face of bitter reality. I refer to two recently published sets of indicators. First, the Government map of areas for which industries can benefit from assisted area status shows a swathe of red across the entire country except the vast majority of the south-east. Secondly, the new map of areas that benefit from European structural funds mirrors almost exactly the assisted areas map.

Overheating in the south helps no one: indeed, it does the economy of the south a disservice. It distorts the national labour market and leads to public spending to relieve congestion and the other effects of growth that is urgently needed elsewhere. Again, that problem highlights the need for balanced regional policy throughout the UK.

We must congratulate the Government on having done more for the English regions in a little more than two years than the previous Administration did in 18. I take immense pride in the fact that fully fledged regional development agencies have been created for all the regions. However, to be effective, they need to be properly resourced. Their funding formula needs to be reassessed after their first year of operation to enable

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them to operate according to the scale of the problems that they face. The Government have already made a start by granting a more generous allocation than anticipated, and for that they must be congratulated.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's words on regional development agency funding, but is it not the case that the RDA, for what it plans, will have a smaller sum than it would have once had, even with the extra money?

Dr. Kumar: The Government have corrected that. We made representations to the Government, and they listened, unlike the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported. That is the difference between this Government and the previous Government.

Mr. Atkinson: Time will tell.

Dr. Kumar: Okay. It must be recognised that our RDA in the north-east should receive additional assistance. Given the historically low land values and a large land bank inherited from English Partnerships which involves remediation problems, we cannot assume that capital receipts will be easily obtained in the early years.

RDA resources need to be partnered by other regional boosts. Unlike the south, we do not have our fair share of innovative sunrise industries. Indeed, a correspondent in *The Sunday Times* noted that 66 per cent. of the companies featured in its list of the 100 top innovators came from below the historic line from the Wash to the Exe.

In my own area of Teesside, we are anxious that that technological imbalance be corrected. An example is ICI's long retreat from bulk chemicals, which means that its large manufacturing site at Wilton is now home to a range of spun-out or disposed former ICI concerns. Wilton is the site of some of the biggest names in the world chemical industry, yet without research and development there is a danger that the complex could become what we in the north-east call a screwdriver plant. That means a place where manufacturing processes occur without the added value of research and development or technological advance. For that reason, we are backing a project to transform the Wilton research and development centre into a new form of innovation park where applied research and development can be carried out for site operators by a trust working in collaboration with prestige universities.

Regional policy for the north-east simply must recognise the strengths of our region and grasp the opportunities that are present. However, it must be honest enough to recognise the structural weaknesses of the region and flexible enough to allow the RDA and other agencies to apply innovative new progammes to correct those weaknesses. That is the mirror image of the policies that have to be designed for the south-east. The problems that we face must be recognised. If we are serious about devolution, the Government must be adult enough to accept that we must have programmes devised and carried by the region for the region.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of speaking in this new, innovative Chamber, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I hope to exercise that privilege again.

10.13 am

Mr. Alan Campbell (Tynemouth): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) not only for securing the debate, but for the measured way in which he made his case. That stands in some contrast to the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson). I am sure that he did not want to give the impression, but he nevertheless did, that he was not in the House when his Government presided over the BSE crisis or when they introduced the automatic fuel escalator that our Government have abolished.

I welcome the report and the opportunity to debate it. In many ways, the report and the debate grew out of what is happening in the north-east. I want to refer to those concerns and to the impact of Government policy on my region.

The report describes in graphic detail the differences between regions, and goes a long way to confirm what many of us already believe. The differences did not begin on 1 May 1997; indeed, some of the statistics in the report describe what happened in the later stages of the previous Government. I hope that the report does not add to any stereotype about the north-east or to any sense of fatalism, because both would be entirely misplaced. The north-east has enormous potential that we can achieve, provided we tackle the fundamental issues faced by the region.

Solutions will not be found by encouraging or promoting inequality between or within regions. The future of the north-east does not lie in a low-pay, low-skill, low-investment economy, nor is it entirely within the grasp of central Government.

I almost find myself agreeing with some of the points made by the hon. Member for Hexham, although I shall try to steer clear of doing so if possible. The north-east, like many other parts of the north, has suffered over the past two decades by being opened up to a global economy that exposed the weaknesses of the traditional industries on which it so heavily depended. That global economy continues to set the pace and is defining new regions. It is redefining the nature of national economies and is casting new doubt on the effectiveness of national economic policy.

The global economy cruelly exposed the weaknesses that we suffer in education and skills not only in the north-east, but across the regions. I am one of the last people whom anyone would find being critical of the excellent teachers in the north-east. However, we have a long way to go if we are attain the standards needed. As has already been said and is confirmed by the report, the north-east has the lowest level of attainment at GCSE and the highest proportion of the work force without qualifications outside Northern Ireland.

We have not created or sustained sufficient small businesses in the past because, like the rest of the UK, we have been too slow to invest and to see the potential of markets. As a Government, we inherited a generation of people in the north-east, too many of whom never knew about work. Some families have been out of work not only in one generation, but in two. Alongside that is a level of poverty in the north-east that helps to explain why we have such unacceptable levels of ill health and crime.

The report is therefore welcome because it is a stark reminder of how far we have to go, but I have one regret about the way in which it was put together and published. It is not to do with the speed with which the exercise was carried out, but to do with the fact that we have its results now. I wish that the study in the report had been carried out two years ago. If we had audited the region then, we would have had a clear view of what was going on in the north-east and we could have given a more measured response as to the success of the Government's policies in the regions.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: LG is an example of what you are talking about. It came to the north east for a site in my constituency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. The practice is for remarks to be addressed to the Deputy Speaker, not to those in the Chamber.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There were 1,000 jobs in the factory at £2,000 a job. However, LG went to Scotland, which offered £27,000 a job. That is the sort of competition that we had in those days, simply because of the Barnett formula.

Mr. Alan Campbell: My recollection is that LG went to Wales, but my hon. Friend is right to say that the region has not been able to compete at that level, and obviously that important issue needs to be addressed. He is right to draw attention to inward investment as well, as I want to do in a moment.

Central to achieving the needed prosperity, before we can share it out, is the concept of getting people into work. We must face facts. Unemployment in the north-east is too high. It is too high as long as anyone in any family who wants work is deprived the opportunity of it. To put that into context, it is sometimes overlooked that in the two years since the election we have created more jobs than have been lost. There has been a net gain in jobs in the north-east. The new deal has been crucial in tackling long-term unemployment. In my constituency, 130 young people are now in work as a result of it. Long-term youth unemployment has halved.

Between 1981 and 1997, 110,000 jobs were lost, most of them in primary industries or in manufacturing. The economy of the north-east continues to change. Inward investment has had an important part to play in that. In the past three years, 128 projects have created or safeguarded 50,000 jobs. We now have micro-electronic and automotive sectors. We also have a growing service sector in business services, call centres and retail services. If we are to move towards a high-technology economy in the north-east, we must continue to attract inward investment. If inward investors are to come to the UK and, hopefully, to the north-east, they must have a stable economic framework in which to invest, which means having the lowest possible interest rates that can be achieved, and low inflation.

I am pleased that the north-east has attracted a higher than average amount of regional selective assistance. We need more small businesses. There are signs that the situation is improving. Figures suggest that more new small businesses are being created and that they are surviving longer. Unlike new small businesses in many regions, they are putting more resources into research and development.

I said earlier that the north-east had the lowest attainment rate at GCSE. However, there are signs of improvement. Education is probably one of those areas in which it is hard to see quick improvement. However, the north-east has more under-fives in education than any other region; we also have the fewest under-eights in classes of more than 30. That is a direct result of the Government's policy. But we need to go further. As well as promoting a knowledge-based enconomy and entrepreneurship, we must ensure that that prosperity is shared.

It is important that 1,600 people in my constituency of Tynemouth benefit from the minimum wage. I am pleased in one way, but not surprised, that the hon. Member for Hexham has again confirmed that his party would abolish it. It is important to my constituency that 2,000 families now find that work pays because of the working families tax credit. It is important that 3,000 pensioners benefit from the minimum income guarantee. Such policies are based on need and, as a result, they not only redistribute within a region, but redistribute between regions.

Mr. Peter Atkinson *rose—*

Mr. Campbell: I think that the hon. Member for Hexham is about to confirm his remarks. I will give way to him in a moment.

All the beneficiaries will find it incredible at the next general election that a sensible Opposition would remove each of those policies.

Mr. Atkinson: It is kind of the hon. Gentleman to give way. He referred to 1,600 families in his constituency. What would he say to my constituents who lost their jobs in the catering and hotel industry because of the national minimum wage?

Mr. Campbell: I hope that the hon. Gentleman can provide evidence of that—or is it simply one of the scare stories that were put about by the Opposition when the minimum wage was debated? They talked about the devastating effect that it would have on the economy, but they have produced no evidence of that. If the hon. Gentleman is willing to provide me with some, I shall be happy to receive it. My constituency has a tourism, hotel and catering industry and I have not received one letter, phone call or complaint about the effect on it of the national minimum wage. In fact, the good employers in my constituency welcome it.

Although unemployment may be falling in the region, I am not complacent, because it is still too high. I shall finish my speech by referring to three courses of action that fall within the Government's remit. First, they can be a purchaser and bring extra spending to a region over and above the normal public expenditure that is allocated to areas. Shipyards on the River Tyne are facing a lack of orders, yet some companies are showing extraordinary faith in the region, because they are investing in new resources and taking on apprentices. I hope that the Ministry of Defence will show such faith, too. I want it to put work into the shipyards of the

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north-east. Shipbuilding is not a sunset industry. We shall continue to need warships, and the best ones are built on Tyneside. There is also a growing market for ferries, and Tyneside could become a world centre of excellence for that.

The second course of action that I want the Government to consider is the dualling of the A1. It would open up a huge area for investment and create jobs. I cannot understand the reluctance of successive Governments in tackling that issue. Whoever wrote the report and said that the north-east has "relatively limited traffic congestion" has not travelled north of Newcastle on the A1.

My final point concerns the regional development agency. I welcome the commitment of additional resources and the continued commitment of more than our fair share of single regeneration budget money. The RDA has a specific role to play in regeneration. We have to complete the schemes that are under way. As a Member of Parliament who represents a declining seaside town, I shall be knocking on the RDA's door because we need regeneration, too. The Opposition will come to rue the day when they proposed to get rid of the regional development agency.

The report demonstrates that we have a long way to go. The north-east may well have further to go than other regions. It illustrates the stark differences between the regions. It also demonstrates differences within regions. Tackling poverty and exclusion wherever they occur is central to the Government's actions, and I have every confidence that they will continue along that path.

10.27 am

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on the very measured manner in which he introduced the debate. The document "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity" has produced a focused response to the problems in our regions. It has sharpened our knowledge and it clearly ensures that we must define a direction for Government spending.

The document stated that there are disparities within regions. However, the disparity within my constituency in the north-east is as great as that between regions, north and south. Within my constituency are leafy suburbs and people who benefit significantly from being involved in the new technology industries, whether it be communications or whether they are part of the university of Durham, the biochemical industries or the pre-medicine industries, all of which have developed since the Labour Government came to power. The small engineering companies—the Samsungs—are features of my constituency and of Stockton, North, your constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They offer many of our suburbs tremendous opportunities.

There is serious disparity within my constituency, such as in the Thornaby area, where the shipbuilding and ship repair industry used to be. It was a fine heavy engineering concern, which, I remind the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), was flattened by his Government. Mrs. Thatcher proudly stood on Teesdale, waved her handbag and said, "Look at what I have achieved." I can tell her what she achieved: the closure of some fine engineering companies and high unemployment, which has translated into unemployability.

I shall be concentrating on those aspects in my comments today because I want the Government to concentrate their thinking. Areas such as the Thornabys and the Parkfields in the north-east are in desperate need of support—significantly more than many of the leafy suburbs.

In conclusion, there are disparities within regions, and there is a serious problem in the north. I hope that people will concentrate their minds and acknowledge that the disparities within constituencies are seriously problematic. That should be the focus of future Government spending.

10.31 am

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): It may be of interest to know that although I represent a south-west constituency, I was born in the north and still care passionately about it. Anyone who has read the report will have been flabbergasted by the spin that the Prime Minister put on it. There is no doubt that the Prime Minister accepts that there is a north-south divide, but in all of his utterances when he launched the report in Manchester, he went out of his way to obscure that. I suspect that he did that to try to placate many of the Labour Members in the north-east who are rightly worried about what is happening. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on his excellent speech. It is clear from that and from the speeches of the hon. Members for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) and for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) that the Prime Minister has not pulled the wool over their eyes. There is undoubtedly a north-south divide.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith)—who, sadly, has had to go off to Committee—would no doubt have pointed out more eloquently than I can that the figures make the north-south divide very clear indeed. We know that unemployment in the north-east is almost three times higher than in the south-east. Disposable income per head is almost a third lower in the north-east than in the south-east. The Office for National Statistics makes it clear that the south-east is 7 per cent. wealthier than the European Union average while, by constrast, the north-east is 15 per cent. below the European average. By contrast, the north-east has the highest proportion of low-income families in the country. I could go on, but hon. Members know those statistics only too well.

It is a pity that the Prime Minister, who was quoted earlier by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central, made no reference in all his remarks to the buffeting that the north-east suffered as a result of the decline of steel, shipbuilding and coal. The Prime Minister was right to point out that there are variations within regions, but those variations are huge and we ignore them at our peril. Surely our knowledge of those regional variations should influence the many different aspects of policy. The new Labour Government fight shy of the word redistribution, but surely that is the Government's role if we want to ensure that we share the nation's prosperity, as the title of the report says. Regional redistribution must be one way of targeting help on those who are most in need.

Reference has been made to the Barnett formula. It is perfectly possible to have that type of arrangement to identify the needs of regions and to ensure that we have a target formula against which we can make judgments on whether we are sharing the nation's prosperity fairly.

Mr. Derek Foster: I am grateful to my honourable namesake for giving way. He mentioned the Barnett formula. I know that the Government do not want us to mention it; they would prefer us to keep silent about it. However, by pointing out the complexities of the economics and geography of poverty, the report makes an incontrovertible case for reviewing the Barnett formula. People from every English region are clamouring for such a review. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me?

Mr. Don Foster: Of course. I have made that clear, but I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to repeat it. I am sure that all hon. Members will be interested in a written answer that was given by the Secretary of State for Scotland, who seems to be perfectly happy with the Barnett formula with regard to Scotland. He states:

"I have had no discussions with the Treasury about the Barnett formula."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall,* 14 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 130WH.]

Time is brief and I know that other hon. Members wish to speak. I have just one dimension to add to a debate that has not taken place. The report shows other interesting statistics. In many respects, under the Labour Government, Britain "isn't getting fairer". During the first years of the Labour Government, the number of people on very low incomes—less than 40 per cent. of average earnings—rose by more than 1 million to a record 8.4 million. Information from other sources, such as the growing concern about the problem of coronary heart disease among unskilled workers compared with professionals, or the evidence showing that educational standards of children from middle-income groups are improving faster than those of children from the worst-off homes, tells a similar story.

I do not believe that Government action is helping in those issues. If we want to help children who are doing least well—those from the less well-off families—it is bizarre that the Government have set targets for the most able 80 per cent. of pupils, but have set no targets for the bottom 20 per cent. If we want to target financial aid on those who are less well-off, I cannot understand the Government's bidding formula of funds for education. For example, Cornwall, where 15 per cent. of pupils are eligible for free school meals, receives £308 per head from the bidding process, whereas Rutland, which is considerably wealthier, with only 6 per cent. being eligible for free school meals, receives £1,006 per head. That will hardly help to tackle the problems of the disadvantaged.

There are many other areas in which the Government have not got it right. A client of the Plymouth citizens advice bureau has recently been disentitled to benefit for not taking a job with a weekly wage of only £101 because it would have cost £40 a week to take it.

I welcome the fact that we now have the social exclusion unit and that we have joined-up thinking on the work of different Government Departments to tackle some of the problems of poverty. It is a pity that the work of that unit is reported only to the Prime Minister and that there is no opportunity for parliamentary involvement in its activities. I worry about the fact that the staff has increased threefold without any discussions in Parliament. We have no idea whether it will increase still further. However, at least it is the beginning of joined-up thinking.

The debate has clearly illustrated that the Government must look seriously at the real divide that exists between the north and the south, and the variations between regions. There is an urgent need for a new approach to regional funding and support to the regions. The Government are very fond of their phrase "the new deal". The time has now come for a new deal for the regions.

10.39 am

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on securing the debate, which has proved interesting. I want to add a perspective that goes to the heart of the north-east's problems and also focus on wider problems in the country as a whole. The title of the report is "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity", which means not just sharing out, but sharing in that prosperity. Realising the potential in regions will help to solve regional differences and inequalities; it is not just a matter of dealing with areas of deprivation. There are sound arguments for focusing on creating prosperity, rather than addressing inequalities, but I also accept the view of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report that economic growth and rises in employment do not necessarily resolve poverty and inequality. We need economic growth, but we also need separate and different measures to deal with poverty and inequality.

I shall not delay the House by discussing the context of the report, but it would not be unduly cynical to say that the exercise was more about presentation than substance. The analysis is limited, as I will show. Anyone examining the structure of relative disadvantage reflected in the report's figures would see immediately that it is about peripherality, rurality, sparsity, distance from markets and access to markets.

It was argued earlier that market forces were not so important, but market forces are crucial in the long run. It is also a question of whether market forces are given an opportunity to exploit the potential in regions. There is great potential in many regions that are relatively economically disadvantaged at present and it is important for market actors to gain access to regions in order to exploit their potential. That is as true in parts of the south-east and the south as it is in the north.

Referring to differences within regions is partly valid. In the south-east, unemployment is highest in Thanet, and in the eastern region it is highest in Great Yarmouth. Those places are peripheral to their regions. Of course, it remains the case that the generalities of regions involve inequalities, but there is an important theme running through the argument—a theme, as I said, of peripherality, infrastructure, and accessing markets and services.

When one looks at the structure, one sees a pattern, which I would not dispute. There is a north and south

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

pattern. However, if one examines local authority districts with more than one third of non-agricultural employment in manufacturing, 12 are in the north-west, 10 in the east midlands, six in Wales and four in the north-east. There are none in London, the east, the south-east or even in Scotland. The Government have neglected manufacturing, and 190,000 jobs have been lost. There is also a pattern of relative disadvantage in regions that are more dependent on manufacturing. That will be exacerbated as a result of the climate change levy, for example. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) provided another example when he referred to the costs to hauliers of taking manufactured goods to markets in more peripheral manufacturing locations.

My key point and contribution to the debate is to stress the importance of dealing with the infrastructure consequences of peripherality. The document "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity" suggests that the picture is highly complex, as differences within regions obscure a more general pattern. In fact, the general pattern is clear, but the statistics in the document are not well compiled to illustrate it. Page 5 of the document states:

> "In the North West, GDP per head in 1995 ranged from 119 in Halton and Warrington to 61 in Sefton...where the UK average is 100".

But a more careful study would show that the residence of corporations is the key factor. Warrington is more industrialised, but not much industry is resident in Sefton, which is more of a commuter area. Similarly, in the south-east, the fact that per capita GDP is high in Berkshire but relatively low in East Sussex has much to do with the residence of pensioner populations. The figures do not tell the whole story, even of the extent of genuine relative economic disadvantage in those regions.

It might be said that the flaw in my argument about peripherality is London. Nine local authorities have an unemployment rate of more than 10 per cent.—five are in London and four in the north-east. I do not want to embarrass the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) too much by agreeing with him. We need to examine the particular circumstances of London. The general point is that local authority districts with high unemployment rates in London are none the less subsisting within a travel-to-work area with relatively low unemployment rates. Areas such as Hartlepool and Middlesbrough in the north-east have high unemployment rates with respect to both local authority residents and the travel-to-work area. We need to take jobs to those areas.

London's relative deprivation is sometimes the result of ethnicity, discrimination or educational disadvantage, which produces a lack of jobs for people often living in an otherwise strong job market. In the north-east, joblessness leads over time to relative economic disadvantage. The solution in London is to help the people; in the north-east, it is to help the regions—a very big difference. The same economic policy cannot deliver solutions to both areas. I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply.

If the Prime Minister wants to deal with these problems, I would advise him to consider several issues. It is clear from his response to the report that he has not done so. First, it is crucial to focus on infrastructure. It has been mentioned several times—not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham—with respect to access to the north-east. Infrastructure is critical for access to markets. Secondly, we must recognise such factors as sparsity, rurality, decline in farm incomes and relative dependence on manufacturing with respect to local government distribution of spending, for example. I know how relatively underfunded Northumberland and Cambridgeshire are in that regard.

I recommend a change in the Government's attitude to manufacturing. They should drop any proposals further to increase fuel duty levels in real terms and they should drop the climate change levy. The spatial impact of policies across the board must be recognised. Reorganising expenditure into a regional development agency will not be the answer, when £330 million has been taken out of the Highways Agency budget in two years. That will not deliver the infrastructure that is required for regions that need to be brought closer to their markets in order to realise their economic potential.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): May I first congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on securing the debate? He and other hon. Members made valuable contributions and made a telling case on behalf of their constituents in the north east. It is rather like being invited to a meeting of the North East Labour group—not a pleasure that I have enjoyed before.

I want to make it clear that the Government fully accept that there are regional disparities within this country. One of those disparities is between the north of England and the south-east of England. Some comments in the press have suggested that the Government do not recognise regional disparities, but that is not the case. The report's statistics on the nation's prosperity make that quite clear. I accept some of the points made by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) about the incompleteness of working only on the basis of GDP per head. London is much richer than elsewhere; the figures on disposable income also show that London is more prosperous than the north-east.

One of the interesting points in the report is that regional disparities in this country are less substantial than in some other European countries. I did not realise that before reading the report and wonder whether other hon. Members were aware of it. That means that it is not easy to solve the problem on its own, and we must bear that in mind when we discuss it.

There is also the issue of complexity, to which several of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members referred. We are talking not simply about a north-south divide, but about rich and poor and about poverty existing side by side with wealth. That is a complicated issue. Some of the highest unemployment in England is on the south coast, and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire mentioned Great Yarmouth. Towns such as Dover and Southend also have extremely high levels of unemployment. It probably surprises many people that Plymouth has a higher unemployment rate than Greater Manchester.

Peripheriality is one factor in regional disparities, but it is not the only one. Depending on which measures one uses, Cheshire is between the second and fifth most affluent county in the country. Cornwall is, by most measures, the poorest. The issue is complicated, and the average regional figures often hide more than they reveal. If we concentrate on average figures, we often miss the differences between regions and the pockets of poverty.

To explain that, I want to go back to a debate in which I was fortunate enough to take part with my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central about 12 months ago. We both represent northern, urban constituencies that are some considerable distance from London. We talked about the decay in housing and the problems of crime and drugs that are associated with it.

I want to ask my hon. Friend a question to get to grips with the difficulty of the problem that we are discussing. Let us imagine that he could, by magic, increase the prosperity of Newcastle, Manchester or Leeds to the level of that in London. Does he really think that that would deal with the problem that he so graphically described in that earlier debate? What effect would it have on some of the people who live in terraced houses? They are socially excluded and are sometimes associated with crime and sometimes victims of it. Often, they are associated with the drugs culture. Would they be affected by an increase in the general level of prosperity if the Government did not take several of the initiatives that they are currently taking to deal specifically with the problems that I mentioned? I suspect that my hon. Friend would agree that we must recognise that regional disparities exist as well as dealing with problems within, and sometimes without, urban areas.

The contribution by the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) was extraordinary—he has obviously been injected with the same drug that has given the rest of the Conservative party amnesia. His contribution was extraordinary, given that we are considering problems in Newcastle and other parts of the country. The Conservative party was in office for 18 years and tripled child poverty, doubled the number of people who were living in poverty, decimated the steel industry, the coal industry and shipbuilding and introduced the fuel duty escalator for good measure. It left us with those problems, but now opposes many of the solutions, such as the creation of regional development agencies or measures to do something directly about poverty by introducing welfare tax benefits and the minimum wage or increasing child allowances.

The hon. Gentleman's contribution was also extraordinary given that several Opposition speakers mentioned what could be done through local initiatives. From my own experience, I know that the Conservative Government largely centralised control and took power away from local democracy in the regions while they were decimating the industries that I mentioned. They took power to the centre and stopped local initiatives.

An important comparison can be made with Europe where it has been possible to take initiatives in regional government and in the government of cities. Barcelona and Catalonia are the most obvious examples of that. They were poorer than many cities and regions in north-east England in the early 1970s, but now form one of the most affluent parts of Europe. That happened because of local initiative, which the previous Government stifled. That is precisely why this Government have introduced regional development agencies, which are now setting out their plans to help develop the regions. That is why the new Local Government Bill, which is before Parliament, contains a provision to enable local government to take the lead in the local community. It also gives local government powers to take a direct interest in the economic benefit of an area. That is in stark contrast to what happened previously.

To put it quite simply, the Government's purpose and objective is not only to recognise regional disparities and the north-south divide, but to approach the problems of social exclusion and poverty wherever they exist.

Mr. Cousins: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Earlier, he asked me whether I could solve the problems that I had described by magicking away the difference in GDP per head between London and Newcastle. My answer is that I would rather not rely on magic for anything. The Cabinet Office produced the report, but will it produce others to enable us to measure regional needs and problems and examine regional spending, or is the present report just a one-off?

Mr. Stringer: None of us must rely on magic, but my hon. Friend's question is an interesting analytical tool for getting at the heart of the problem. The Cabinet Office's responsibility and purpose is to produce reports that will help the Government and Parliament to tackle the problems of poverty and social exclusion. That is why we have a social exclusion unit. I look forward to many more debates on this issue and to being supported by many more facts, which will set out the statistics and the causes of problems.

We are coming to the end of an interesting debate. We aim to create an environment in which business can thrive. We want business to thrive and regions to survive. To answer one of the first questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central asked, doing something about regional disparities is bound to help the prosperity of the whole country. We are wasting resources while regional disparities exist. Tackling that problem is the Government's policy.

Caribbean Banana Industry

11 am

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I remind the House that the Caribbean islands entered the banana trade after the second world war under a Labour Government. At that time there was little money to invest in Britain, let alone its colonies. So, in 1947, the Labour Government decided to allocate the banana trade to the eastern Caribbean nations, including Surinam and, later, Belize. Europe—and Britain especially—had begun to indulge in a highly subsidised beet sugar industry, which competed with sugar cane grown in the Caribbean islands, so the allocation of the banana trade was a compensation for the loss of the Caribbean sugar trade to the European beet sugar trade, helping the islands to diversify into bananas.

The Caribbean islands are not ideally suited to the production of bananas, as they are largely mountainous and consequently have shallow soils. There are also problems with the amount of rainfall: bananas need a great deal of rain to produce a heavy tonnage per acre. Britain and Europe knew in the 1940s that Caribbean bananas would cost a great deal more to produce. The current cost of production per tonne is about double that generally achieved on the African coast and in central and Latin America.

That problem is fundamental in relation to the World Trade Organisation-compatible regime desired by the Government. It would be delightful to solve that problem, which the European Union has recently tackled on three occasions. I made a bet with the previous Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), whose officials and Deputy Minister—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker)—proclaimed in European Standing Commitee B—that their proposals were WTO-compatible. When the WTO found that they were not, the Minister handed me £5.

It is impossible to make the regime—or, indeed, any regime—produce a WTO-compatible result in the eastern Caribbean. I contend that we must go for a WTO waiver, which can be achieved only if we conduct proper negotiations with all parties concerned and work out an agreeable solution. There is an agreeable solution on the table, with which the United States would go along. Evidence from central and Latin American countries shows that they are sympathetic to it, and the eastern Caribbean would very much like to achieve it. However, ministerial determination, enthusiasm and persistence will be required if such a solution is to be successful.

I remind the House that we are dealing with the traditional African, Caribbean and Pacific countries: the Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Surinam, Somalia, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, Belize, Cape Verde, Grenada and Madagascar. Their total production or allocation is 857,000 tonnes. The European Union consumes 4 million tonnes of bananas per annum; in that context, 857,000 tonnes does not seem that much.

Twenty per cent. of the bananas supplied to Europe come from its own production in the French overseas departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe; the Spanish Canary islands; and Somalian supplies to Italy. Eighty per cent. is imported from other countries, 21 per cent. of those imports coming from the traditional ACP countries that I listed and 3 per cent. from other ACP countries. The remaining 76 per cent. comes from central and Latin America. That region gets the lion's share of the trade, so one might ask—as I think we should—what is it complaining about?

I am especially interested in, and know well, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Dominica, Belize, Grenada and Surinam, whose total production is 477,000 tonnes, or just over half the 857,000 tonnes that ACP countries supply to the European Union. It is not too difficult to create a regime permitting free access to the European market. However, price is another matter. As I said, costs of production in eastern Caribbean countries are roughly double those in central America. We must therefore produce a tariff that protects those countries from Latin American production: that will involve a tariff and quota regime. The United States, however, is proposing a tariff-only regime. Were such a regime be entered into—especially on the basis of the European Community's current proposals—banana growing in the eastern Caribbean would soon come to an end.

The Commission proposes that the regime takes a two-stage approach: a transitional regime allowing time for adaptation in the Caribbean and other ACP countries followed by a tariff-only regime. Unfortunately, the regime proposed for the transitional period would not allow the Caribbean industry to survive. The Caribbean Banana Exporters Association has advised me that an effective transitional regime and a much longer transitional period are essential if devastating damage to the Caribbean is to be avoided.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate. I support everything that he has said; I am sure that I shall be in complete agreement with the rest of his argument. I was in St. Lucia this summer, and had the privilege of visiting Ellis Rupert Gajadhar's banana plantation. Mr. Gajadhar sent me a letter which confirms my hon. Friend's argument. He said:

"there will be serious social, economic and political dislocation in these islands if we were to lose the banana industry."

Does my hon. Friend agree with that? Will he comment specifically on the position in St. Lucia, as I know he is familiar with the island?

Mr. Wells: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, as I was about to discuss the devastation that will be caused if the banana industry goes out of production. I fear that it will do so within five years under the proposals.

St. Lucia has 126,000 inhabitants, of whom more than 50 per cent. rely on the banana industry for their income. If those people cannot grow bananas, what can they grow? There is certainly no other tropical agricultural product that can compete on the international market. The banana trade has had the advantage of preferential quota and tariff arrangements and all other tropical agricultural products are produced at much lower cost in many countries producing them. The St. Lucians would not be able to produce and distribute a sufficient quantity of such products to bear marketing and shipping costs, and cannot diversify into other crops.

Unfortunately, one crop is being grown: marijuana. It grows extremely well as it has no known pests or diseases. It is being destroyed by the US Drug Enforcement Administration in and around the volcano of St. Vincent and in remoter areas of Dominica and St. Lucia. It is a very profitable product. If people are denied any other crop to sell to the export markets, they will undoubtedly grow more marijuana and we will be pushing them into it.

Mrs. Gillan: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way. Will he also comment on the fact that the islands lend themselves to smuggling? Unfortunately, it is likely that drugs will pass from south America through the islands and on to the American mainland. Therefore, if you remove the livelihood from the islanders, the opportunities to move into illegal activity are so much greater by virtue of the islands' geography and their location between major drug-producing areas and a major drug-consuming area. That is highly dangerous.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. The Chair has no intention of removing anyone's livelihood. Remarks must be addressed through the Chair.

Mrs. Gillan: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Wells: My hon. Friend is right. Not only can the islands grow marijuana, but they lie on the line between Colombia, Europe and America. Many islanders are being tempted into drug trafficking. They are aiding the import and export of drugs and assisting their passage to Europe and America. Such corruption can lead not just to illegal activity, but probably to the downfall of democracy in those islands and their capacity to enforce the rule of law. We are dealing with serious problems. It could be said that it is not important, that they are tiny islands and that we can live with it, but I do not think that we can. They will become nests of serious corruption and serious human rights problems throughout the Caribbean.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Before he leaves the subject, does he not also think that it would be ironic if the actions of the big banana producers, working through the USA Government and the World Trade Organisation, brought a dangerous drug culture much nearer the mainland of the United States, as that is exactly what it is trying to fight at the moment?

Mr. Wells: I very much agree. The United States is misleading itself in fighting the regime so strongly and will pay a high price. Given the determination and enthusiasm of Ministers, the Government and indeed our Parliament, there is a possibility of persuading the United States that there is a reason to make a sensible agreement under WTO rules. I believe in free trade and I know that it enhances the development of the third world and developing countries, but because of its history, we must be flexible enough to make exceptions. However, one exception that we propose to make via the European Union will lead not to the continued prosperity of the banana regime, but to its closure.

For the benefit of hon. Members, let me set out exactly what is proposed. It is a two-stage process. First, the Commission proposes to maintain a tariff-quota regime for the transitional period. However, the quota would not be allocated on past performance. That is a major problem. There will be three quotas. The first is for 2.2 million tonnes and the second is for 353,000 tonnes, both at a tariff of €75. The third tariff quota would be for 850,000 tonnes. The method of allocation for the first and second tariff quotas remains open, but it is likely to be on a first-come, first-served, or boat race method. The third tariff would be allocated by strike price auction, the auction being for the level of tariff payable. It is intended to meet the needs of these countries, the ACP traditional suppliers, because it provides a tariff preference of up to €275. It is designed to produce the price necessary to keep the Caribbean banana growers in business.

The Caribbean Banana Exporters Association concludes that it is difficult to think of an allocation system more likely to drive the Caribbean out of the market. The auction system places smaller operators at an immense disadvantage. It removes the certainty of access that is essential to economic shipping arrangements and to contracting for sales of bananas. The ability to contract for at least a year in advance, both for quality, reliable shipping and banana sales lies at the heart of a successful banana business. The strike price system would deny that essential need to the Caribbean and other ACP countries.

I remember why Jamaica and Trinidad went out of bananas. Trinidad was finally driven out by sikatoka disease, but the main reason was that their ships were only half filled with bananas. Sending a half-full refrigerated ship hugely increases the shipping costs and the cost per tonne landed in Britain. It would drive any banana producer out of the market. A viable industry is not possible, unless at even higher costs than now, with such a system. Ships must be full and that requires planning.

I agree with the CBEA. The present EU proposals are likely to produce the end of the Caribbean banana industry more quickly than any I have seen so far. The system will last only until 2006. If you put yourself in the position of a banana farmer who is faced with the possibility of replanting his farm, which he must do from time to time, reorganising his drainage because drainage is essential and has to be constantly cleared if bananas are to thrive, you will not put that kind of effort—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House once more that the Chair is not going to put himself in any position at the present time.

Mr. Wells: I was not putting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must be careful with the forms of expression we use for the purposes of the *Official Report*. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that.

Mr. Wells: I will certainly try to adhere to your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was trying to put us in the position of a banana farmer. When I used "you", I

[Mr. Wells]

meant the banana farmer. If you were a banana farmer, you would not invest in a field of bananas if you knew that in 2006 the tariff arrangements would end and you would have to compete with a banana farmer in, shall we say, Ecuador which also has a series of small farms as opposed to the plantations where bananas are grown in Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala and other central American countries.

The farmer must make the decision to invest in the banana industry. If it is to go out of existence in 2006, he must find something else to do before that hits him in the face. Because these proposals create severe instability, and because banana farmers do not know how the market will develop, but that it will end in 2006, they will begin to move out of bananas straight away. If the Caribbean banana is to survive, it must become more productive. Becoming more productive means investing more in the banana fields. More roads will be needed to carry the bananas gently from the farms so that they do not become bruised or damaged. More irrigation will be needed: there must be a certainty of water supply and bananas must be given more water to counter the drought periods which occur in the Caribbean each year. That will require more money. It also means better shipping and putting the bananas in containers and so on, all of which involves capital investment. If the market is uncertain because the European Union proposals lack certainty—perhaps because the EU has not thought the position through—there will be no assurance for the banana producer to make the investment necessary to make himself productive and competitive.

Mrs. Gillan: Does my hon. Friend also agree that the EU has shown a complete lack of common sense by recently giving large grants to install and build the sheds for stacking and packing the bananas in St. Lucia? Large sums have gone into creating the right environment so that the bananas can reach their destinations in good condition. Was it not just a waste of money to have provided grants that effectively mean the death of the industry?

Mr. Wells: I could not agree more. Much effort has gone into increasing the quality of bananas from the east Caribbean, which is affected climatically by periods of drought. Bananas need special handling if they are not to become bruised and damaged and regarded as sub-quality when they reach the markets in the United Kingdom. They must compete with products from Latin American and central American countries on quality as well as price. The EU promised a great deal of aid of the type described by my hon. Friend. Supermarkets in this country—certainly Tesco, Sainsbury's, Safeway and Waitrose—have set up a scheme to adopt certain farmers to specify how they want bananas produced, wrapped and boxed and so on, to increase quality.

Banana farmers have reacted extremely well. When I went to Southampton to see some of the banana production, I found that quality has increased hugely as a result of investment in St. Lucia and other places in boxing plants, port terminals and elsewhere. More money is required. The Prime Minister of St. Lucia told me when I visited the island after the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference, which both of us attended, that the EU, as usual, had promised a great deal of money, but had not delivered it. He said that some of the banana farms—some of the smallest on the worst land and on the steepest slopes—must go out of production because they cannot produce the necessary quality and their prices are too high. The EU had promised investment in those villages to provide the farmers with alternative means of earning their living. None of that money, which was promised two years ago, has been delivered. It is all very well for the EU to promise huge aid in replacement of banana production but, given its current appalling record of delivering aid properly and on time, many St. Lucians and St. Vincentians, if they are foolish enough to depend on it, will find themselves poverty stricken. All that must lead to an essential discussion on the politics of the banana industry.

I should like the Minister to take special note of what I am about to say because I have checked this argument with several sources. As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the House we have to live in a world of mirrors and smoke to discover exactly what is happening in Government. The Prime Minister of St. Lucia put it most directly. He said that the British Prime Minister had abandoned the Caribbean, that he had decided that there should be no further support for the Caribbean position if that support would result in further disruption of trade between the United States and the EU, and he had given instructions accordingly. That is what the St. Lucian Prime Minister believes. I have checked that with members of delegations who have been to see Baroness Scotland, who is Dominican by origin, having been born in that country. She has the most tremendous sympathy for the Caribbean and knows a little about the banana industry and other matters. However, she also gave the impression that the Government were not prepared to do much more to support the Caribbean, especially if it would disrupt other trading arrangements which the UK considered to be more important.

The only reason we got a banana agreement in 1995 was that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, took up the matter with persistence and enthusiasm and a feeling that we owed those small islands a great deal and that there was a moral position for us to take to protect them from central American competition in the banana industry. Only by that action from my right hon. Friend did we win through, and win over the European nations—not all of them, because the EU is divided on the issue, but we got a majority. I believe that that is possible again.

Having had indications that the US recognises the problems that my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) pointed out, I believe that the US has an interest in the stability and democratic credibility of the islands and is prepared to consider a solution that at least will enable east Caribbean banana producers to survive. A tiny proportion of the trade in bananas is involved and most central and Latin American countries will not be greatly affected. Banana production and consumption in the UK and the EU is increasing, so the preservation of a small preferred area, however we do it, would be acceptable.

I have also had indications from people who negotiate on behalf of the Ecuadorian Government. Ecuador's banana industry is interesting in that, like the east Caribbean industry, it is based on small farmers. It does not have the great plantations that I described earlier. The Ecuadorians are very sympathetic to the islands' position. They objected to the previous regime which gave preferential arrangements to distributors of bananas, but did not directly benefit the banana farmers. But, removing that from the equation, they believe that a sensible arrangement can be reached. Therefore, in my view, if this country goes after an agreement, there is every chance of getting it. I urge the Minister to do that. What a triumph it would be.

Finally, I wish to raise the matter of the WTO waiver. The Lomé convention is under WTO waiver, which lifts in February 2000. The Lomé succesor agreement was largely agreed in Brussels last week. I read that an application has been made to renew it. Strangely enough, the banana protocol never came under that waiver. I always thought that it should have done because we would therefore have avoided many problems.

We know that the WTO has to move by consensus. This reinforces what I said about trying to get an agreement. If we cannot, we shall fail to get a WTO waiver because it will be blocked by the dissenting party or parties. That in turn reinforces what I said about the need to reach an agreement between the parties, which I believe is possible. Despite all the legal advice given to the Minister or given in Europe, no regime could establish a banana protocol to preserve the east Caribbean banana industry unless there were a WTO waiver. Even if such a regime could be established, it would almost certainly drive the Caribbean out of production.

A WTO waiver is therefore the only way forward. A WTO waiver will be required for the Lomé convention anyway. If the banana industry were included, however, we would not obtain a waiver for the newly negotiated convention. Therefore, if we are determined to achieve a good result for the east Caribbean, we must reach a consensual agreement.

I beg the Minister to pursue the matter with determination and thoroughness, for which she is well known in Europe and in this country. She must persist, pursue, harry and hassle to get an agreement. That is the only way to prevent these countries from descending into poverty and drugs-related enterprises; otherwise, they will fall into a sorry, despicable and criminalised state.

This debate is not just about bananas; it is about human beings, their employment and their welfare. We have been associated with the countries concerned for 450 years—intermarriages and deep friendships have been established—and we owe them nothing less than our persistence and our insistence.

10.32 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on bringing this issue to this Chamber. He took an interest in this matter as Chairman of the International Development Committee, of which I was a member. I was inspired by his interest to focus on this issue, which is difficult and complicated—perhaps that is why no Labour Member, with the exception of the Minister, is speaking on it this morning. That is a tragedy, as many thousands of people in this country have relatives in the Caribbean who depend on the banana industry. I appeal to Labour Members to take more interest in this issue, which is important to many constituents.

One of my earliest memories—if not the earliest—is eating my first banana. My mother came back from the greengrocer and said, "Hey, look, I've got some bananas." We had read about bananas in geography books, and seen photographs of them, but it was our first experience of this extraordinary fruit. If I may go off on a medical tack, I shall explain why it is such an excellent food.

Bananas contain a great deal of fibre, which is very good for the bowels, and lots of carbohydrate, which provides energy. They contain potassium in great measure, which is good for the heart and counteracts all the salt in our diet. They even contain an anti-depressant substance, which affects the brain and makes the eater feel good. The banana is nature's own comfort food. Furthermore, it comes in its own hygienic, pre-packed container, which is biodegradable. It is a dream of a food for doctors and environmentalists.

However, the dollar banana—the big, pale, yellow sort sold in supermarkets—is a different matter. It is a cheap banana grown in huge plantations by, in particular, Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte, which use near slave labour in Latin America. The big producers also use poisonous pesticides and herbicides, which are becoming less effective as the banana plant acquires immunity. I checked my facts with Kew Gardens in my constituency, and I was told that dollar banana plants are examples of monoculture, which will lead to the eventual extinction of the plant. Alternatively, the producers might use genetic engineering to produce a different sort of plant. Genetic modification is not a popular option at the moment.

Consumers are becoming increasingly worried about their food. They will soon learn that the dollar banana from the big plantations in central and Latin America is not decent food, and they will stop buying it. The Caribbean banana, however, is often smaller—it comes in child-size portions, which I have found useful for my children because there is less waste—and it is sweeter and tastier. It is grown on small farms in the Caribbean and Africa. Some are grown organically, and must be a healthier option and product.

Sales of the dollar banana have fallen in recent years, which might be why big companies such as Chiquita have become scared and aggressively protective of their business. I would argue that that is why Chiquita funds both political parties in the USA, and last year put pressure on the US Government to go to the World Trade Organisation and cry foul. It claims that the EU's protection of Caribbean and ACP bananas through the Lomé convention—which enables small farmers in those countries to export their crops—is not fair.

This is a timely debate, as the Caribbean banana industry currently faces a lethal threat from the European Commission's latest proposals. I did not previously believe that those proposals were intended to destroy the Caribbean industry, although the speech by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford has made

[Dr. Jenny Tonge]

me rethink my view on that—perhaps they are intended to destroy it. Whatever the intention, however, that will be the effect. The Caribbean growers would no longer have guaranteed access to the market, and would have to compete at auction for import licences for every tonne of bananas that they export.

The banana trade depends on the ability to contract a year ahead in shipping and sales. That requires certainty of aecess. Although the Commission proposes to give a substantial tariff preference to Caribbean countries, that will not suffice to ensure access for the Caribbean. The auction system would greatly favour the dominant traders in Latin America, which will have continued access, under a different allocation system, to the 2.5 million tonnes quota, at €75 tariff. They would also be free to compete in the auction for the 850,000 tonnes quota, which is intended primarily to meet Caribbean and ACP needs. They would be able to bid very competitively against the smaller banana countries for the quotas. That is partly because the main dollar quota is likely to be allocated on a first come, first served basis, which—as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford said—is otherwise known as the boat race. Traders bringing full ships over from Latin America will have every incentive to bid high for licences, which will enable them to dispose of bananas that they have failed to get in on the first come, first served basis.

The Government stated that they were willing to proceed on the basis of the Commission proposal, provided that Caribbean interests were safeguarded. However, it is not clear how that proviso can be met without radical changes to the proposal. Small-scale growers in the Caribbean need to know that there will be a market for their bananas. They cannot know that under the auction system, even with the proposed tariff preference. How can that system be reconciled with the repeated assurances to the Caribbean that its interests will be safeguarded? It does not add up. As has already been explained, an alternative system would be the allocation of quota on the basis of past performance. That is the preferred option of the Caribbean countries and the Commission, but it has not been proposed because the Commission has yet to secure agreement among interested parties on the details of such a system, particularly the reference period. The Commission really must try harder.

Another disturbing element in the Commission's proposals is the commitment to switch to a tariff-only system from 2006. The Caribbean must be granted sufficient time to restructure its industry and reduce the near total dependence of some states on a single product. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford has already told us about that, but I should say that it will prove an extremely difficult and time-consuming task. In three of the Windward Islands, bananas account for more than half of all export earnings and one third of all employment. They are equally vital to important regions of other Caribbean states. A massive economic adjustment will be necessary, and that cannot be made in only six years. The ACP states have asked for at least 10 years, and some European Union member states—but not the UK—have supported the granting of that longer period. I urge the Government to offer their support; otherwise, there will be disruption in the Caribbean and, as has been said, people will resort to growing drugs. Does the world really want that?

Mrs. Gillan: Has the hon. Lady read the Caribbean Banana Exporters Association report, which was written by Henry Gill and Anthony Gonzales? It forecasts that the loss of the banana industry would lead to significant unemployment and considerable social unrest, particularly in the Windward Islands, where 50 per cent. of the 30,000 people who farm bananas would quickly lose their jobs.

Dr. Tonge: I have read the report, and I thank the hon. Lady for bringing it to our attention. It makes it clear why we should show much greater interest in this issue, and I am saddened that so few hon. Members have attended this morning's debate. Although it may seem like a technical debate on trade, we are in fact discussing the future of the Caribbean: its direction, stability, democracy and economy. It is vital that the islands' economies remain stable, and that they have a product to export.

Mr. Wells: With regard to the disruption of social mores, some of the islands—particularly St. Lucia, but also Grenada and, to a lesser extent, St. Vincent and Dominica—could divesify into tourism. However, if the disorder, burglary and criminal activity to which the loss of the banana industry is likely to lead actually occur, tourism will simply switch off, and the islands will lose that industry as well.

Dr. Tonge: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman—it is a serious problem. I speak to various groups in my constituency and throughout the country about how to prevent international unrest, instability and civil war, which always lead to the abuse of human rights. This is an extremely important issue for Caribbean countries. We must nip in the bud the destruction of a trade that supports those islands; its loss would lead to untold damage.

Mrs. Gillan: Does the hon. Lady also agree that the Government are sending out the wrong signals about offshore financial services industries, which are a potential source of employment? It appears that the Government will not support those industries in any form, even though they could eventually offer alternative employment for some of the smaller islands.

Dr. Tonge: I was about to deal with that matter in relation to diversification. Clearly, the Caribbean islands should not depend entirely on bananas for ever and ever, amen. We must urge the Government to consider all options, and the one that the hon. Lady mentions is very important.

The Commission has threatened to apply the tariff-only option immediately if the Council fails to agree on alternatives. To paraphrase a famous tennis player, I would like to think that it cannot be serious, given the devastating impact that such a step would have. If a tariff-only system were adopted now, the Caribbean banana industry would rapidly be destroyed. That could be averted only if the European Union extended to it a deficiency payment system comparable to that currently

extended to EU banana growers, but the Commission insists that that would be politically and financially unacceptable. However, the destruction of the Caribbean economies is no less unacceptable.

Another option which is often discussed is aid for diversification. That is a welcome measure, but it is not a solution in itself. Payments to Governments for diversification will not keep Caribbean banana growers in business. Such payments will not ensure access to the market while diversification takes place, nor will they feed, clothe and educate the growers' children. The Caribbean needs aid, but with trade.

I realise that the Department for International Development stood up valiantly for the ACP during last week's discussion in Brussels on the successor to the present Lomé convention. The Lomé commitments are being ruthlessly whittled away, but there remains the EU commitment to take all necessary steps to ensure the continuing viability of the banana industries. That commitment is vital, and must not be further weakened.

Finally, I invite the Minister to confirm that the Government will oppose an auction system that cannot provide the assured duty-free access that is essential to the survival of the Caribbean. The Government must argue the historical basis for quota allocation, at least in respect of the 850,000 tonne quota that is proposed to meet the needs of the ACP. They must insist on a much longer transitional period before the introduction of a tariff-only system. As the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford said, they must consider including the Caribbean banana trade in the WTO waiver. Unless those measures are adopted, there will be dire unrest in the Caribbean and we shall lose a superior product, the Caribbean banana, and the knowledge and expertise required to grow it. The dollar banana will eventually become extinct, and we shall then be able sincerely to say, "Yes, we have no bananas!"

11.49 am

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): That should not be too difficult to follow. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on securing this debate, and on the manner in which he conducted it. It is well known that he is the House's expert on such matters, and has many years' experience in Caribbean issues, particularly bananas. It is a pity that the Government have not initiated a debate on this issue. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said, it is a shame that more people have not shown an interest. As recently as a year ago, a number of people attended a Commitee debate on Commission proposals, which suggests that there was some interest then. During that debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford challenged the former Minister about the WTO compatibility of those proposals. The then Government appeared to be convinced—albeit wrongly—that they were compatible.

My hon. Friend gave an introduction to the background of the problem, and to the sugar industry. We are approaching a reform of the sugar regime in the Community, but I do not believe that anyone connected with agricultural politics expects any opportunity for regeneration of the sugar cane industry in the Caribbean. Sugar cane is now grown in many parts of the world, using highly efficient industrialised processes. We should not be lulled into the belief that the sugar industry would provide an alternative to bananas.

I shall not waste the House's time by going through the employment issues involved, as both my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford and the hon. Member for Richmond Park have made those points admirably. The banana industry is the major part of the economy for most of the eastern Caribbean.

I endorse the comments made about the drug risk. We cannot underestimate the potential damage to those islands in terms of their culture and the effects of criminality on their tourism industry, and also to the United States and other countries in which the drug criminals seek to market their goods. In this country, we must stop at nothing to prevent such developments. It is all very well running anti-drug campaigns here, but if we are complicit in encouraging the development of a drug industry in the Caribbean, we shall do much to undermine all that good work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford said, no real alternative agricultural products are available to the islands. The banana industry is, and must remain, at least for the foreseeable future, a major part of their economy.

I turn to the World Trade Organisation, and, in particular, the role of the United States within it. Conservative Members recognise the importance and value of the WTO, and, as my hon. Friend said, we support the principles of a move towards free trade. I am less convinced that the European Union and the United Kingdom Government understand the implications for the Caribbean of accepting, almost without debate, some of the arguments put forward by the United States through the WTO.

We need to challenge the United States over several aspects of its approach to this debate, such as its hypocrisy over its overall levels of support for agriculture, which we know are far greater than it would have us believe. There is no banana industry in the United States. The hon. Member for Richmond Park reminded us of the financial support that the major American companies involved in the banana industry give to political parties, even though there is no indigenous industry for them to worry about. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford said, those companies already have 76 per cent. of the import trade into the European Union. They are not exactly hard done by.

That brings me to the Commission's proposals. I preface my comments about them by saying that I am astonished that they have been put forward in their present form. That is because of what I have read in the document entitled "The Commission reports to the Council on consultations with a view to settlement of the banana disputes", dated 10 September 1999, issued by the Directorate-General for Trade. It is a recent document, which follows the WTO panel's dismissal of the previous system, but predates the proposals that we are discussing now. It makes a couple of statements that are remarkable given the present proposals. In reference to auctioning, it states:

"Auctioning continues to be questioned as to its WTO-compatibility. No operators were in favour of this system. Other conventional systems appear unlikely to provide a resolution of this issue."

[Mr. James Paice]

Given that no one was in favour of auctioning, and that there are questions about its WTO compatibility, it is remarkable that the Commission should introduce the measure as an integral part of its proposals to settle the dispute.

My hon. Friend mentioned waivers, and this same document refers to the fact that the Community regarded access under the tariff quota system as

"a volume limited tariff preference and hence covered the existing article 1 waiver. However, the WTO concluded that a tariff preference, which is limited in size, is by definition a tariff quota."

One does not need to be an Einstein to work that out. It is patently obvious, and I do not understand how the European Union could have been foolish enough to believe that that was covered. The document goes on to say:

"Unless such a quota respects article XIII GATT rules in terms in particular of erga omnes access and distribution, it requires a derogation (waiver) from that article. In GATT history, a waiver based on article XIII has only been granted once. Our numerous contacts have made it clear that complainants and parties involved are either not ready to grant such a waiver or only at a very high price."

I say that not directly to caution against my hon. Friend's proposition for a waiver, because he put forward a sound argument for it. However, there are obviously some doubts. Having said that, I quoted earlier the Commission's remarks about auctions, and it seems to have taken little heed of its own views on that subject. One might, therefore, have to counter the comments about waivers.

My hon. Friend has outlined the present proposals to the House, and I shall not repeat them. However, I want to mention the matter of the auction with a tariff preference of €275 for the third element of the quota, not only because of the remarks that I read out earlier on the unacceptability of auctioning to all the operators who were asked, but because of the huge disadvantage to the Carribbean operators of an auction-based system. The hon. Member for Richmond Park also referred to that.

Access to the European market is an essential part of the core business of the Caribbean banana producers. We are talking not about marginal tonnages, but about the producers' core business, yet the auctions would place the small operators at a significant disadvantage. However, the dollar banana producers, operating on a much greater international scale, could use their marginal costings basis to make higher bids and secure that extra tonnage to ensure that the boats were full. The marginal costings that they could use to supply existing markets would be better for them than seeking to open up new markets in, for example, central or eastern Europe. The Caribbean producers would, therefore, have no certainty of access and, given what I have said about the auction-based system, I am amazed that the Commission is proposing it. I look forward to the Minister's response on that subject.

A further aspect is the transitional period to the tariff-only regime. The banana industry in the Caribbean would have to carry out a huge amount of restructuring. Considerable structural change would be necessary, and it is highly unlikely that that could be achieved in the five years allowed under the proposals. The Caribbean banana producers have said clearly that they want at least a 10-year proposal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), our Front-Bench spokesman, is unable to make a speech on the subject, but her interventions showed the considerable knowledge and personal experience that she gained by visiting some of the producers. The questions that she raised bear repetition and I shall add to what she said.

I hope that the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will accept the Government's major responsibility to the Caribbean producers, for moral and historical reasons—the hon. Member for Richmond Park referred to the countless citizens of this country who can trace their roots back to that part of the world—for Commonwealth reasons and also for the selfish reason that we discussed: the potential of drugs to damage our country and our culture.

I hope that the Government will tell us what they are doing to get involved in discussions. Although negotiations with the WTO have ultimately to be conducted by the Commission, we cannot get away from the fact that Britain still enjoys a special relationship with the United States, which is the major spokesman for the three big companies involved. I hope that the Government are being proactive in arguing the case with the United States for the position that we have described and are not adopting the complacent attitude that the Commission will sort it out and that it will all be WTO-compatible. As we have already seen, that is not the case.

The Government have a duty of responsibility to be proactive in trying to pursuade the United States Government that it is in their interests, as well as in ours, that the Caribbean banana industry continues to have realistic access to the European market.

Will the Government tell us their stance on the third tranche of quota TRQ3 and the length of the transition period that would follow it? Do the Government support a strike auction-based system or, if the process is to be adopted, another way of allocating that element of the quota?

What are the Government doing about the action taken early this year by the United States to impose retaliatory duties on several products, and their withholding liquidation for many others in retribution for the European Union's stance on the arrangements?

This is a serious issue; it is a great shame that more Members from both sides of the House are not present to participate in the debate. It gets to the root of our international and historical responsibilities to parts of the world with which this country has been associated for many centuries. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford reminded us, its fulfilment is the Lomé arrangement, which we hope will shortly be concluded. It would be absurd if, on one hand, we paid lip service to Lomé and the need to support the ACP countries through the European Union, and at the same time allowed an arrangement under which the key industry in the eastern Caribbean would eventually disappear. The European Union could set a tariff-only system at a high level which would protect the industry, but, as has been said, it would be subject to compensation under article XXVIII of the general agreement on tariffs and trade; therefore, it would cost a lot of money. We must accept that possibility.

We do not necessarily have clear solutions to the proposition, not least because we are not in a position to do anything about it. However, I hope that, when the Minister responds to the debate, she will give us a clear assurance about the Government's position and their involvement in the matter. We want to know that the Government are not simply allowing the Commission to make all the running, because this country has a key role. It has more experience than virtually any other country in Europe in dealing with Caribbean issues and trade. I hope that that experience is being put to good use for the advantage of those islands, to which we owe a great duty. I hope that the Minister will give us the assurance that we seek.

I conclude by repeating my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford on introducing the debate and on being a stalwart champion in the House of the banana industry in the eastern Caribbean. I hope that the rest of us will stand beside him in championing that cause.

12.6 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): This has been an interesting and worthwhile debate. It is the first time that I have spoken in this Chamber, although, like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have spoken in the European Parliament. We should be more familiar than most with semi-circular Chambers.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on choosing the topic for debate and on being fortunate enough to raise it in this Chamber. The hon. Gentleman showed his interest in and knowledge of the Caribbean banana industry by giving us background information on the present situation, and he brought that knowledge to bear in his ideas on how we could proceed.

Other hon. Members spoke in the debate and voiced their concerns about safeguarding the interests of Caribbean suppliers. I shall try to respond to as many of the points raised as I can. Every hon. Member who spoke expressed regret at the poor attendance by both sides of the Committee—all three of the main parties were represented by Front-Bench spokespeople or by the hon. Member who introduced the debate—yet we all know that there is a wider interest in the issue in the House, as past debates and cross-party consensus on the matter have shown. If I have any complaint about this morning's contributions it is that they under-estimated the degree of consensus among all parties in the House on the importance of the Caribbean producers' position. We have their interests very much at heart and Members from all parties have been active in pursuing those interests. I hope to say more about how the Government have been active and, to pick up the point made by the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), proactive in trying to find satisfactory ways to safeguard the interests of Caribbean banana producers.

The United Kingdom has a long-standing commitment to maintaining such a major place in our market for the Caribbean producers. We are fully apprised of the importance of the banana industry, which is a significant world industry. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) spoke amusingly about her first taste of a banana; over the years, the banana has become the most popular fruit in the United Kingdom. Its consumption has doubled in this country in the past 10 years and there is significant consumption all over the world. Given that it is such a popular fruit, most of us feel that it is reasonable for traditional suppliers in the Caribbean to continue to supply an important share of that market.

The Caribbean producers, particularly Jamaica, Belize and the four Windward Islands—Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia and St. Vincent—are heavily dependent on sales to the United Kingdom. They depend on preferential access arrangements, which are defined in the EU banana regime. The need for that trading preference, which has been illustrated in the comments of hon. Members this morning, is at the heart of the problem now facing us.

I come to this debate as a Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, but I have come across the issue in other ministerial roles, particularly in the Foreign Office where the matter was mentioned many times in the General Affairs Council. I emphasise that the Departments concerned—MAFF, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development—have worked closely together because the issue tends to be raised in the councils of which they are members. We need to liaise closely and have done so to ensure that our concerns about the matter are properly raised at every opportunity.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford referred to the recent ACP-EU discussions. I am pleased that the draft declaration that was issued at the conclusion of those discussions includes a strong commitment to the ACP banana suppliers. The opening lines of the declaration state:

> "The ACP and the EU recognise the overwhelming economic importance to the ACP banana suppliers of their exports to the EU market. In view of the vulnerability of the economies of these countries, the EU agrees to take all necessary measures to ensure the continued viability of their banana export industries."

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development who was very active in proposing ideas at that meeting.

The EU banana regime is complicated. It tries to reconcile international trade rules with differing interests and concerns within the EU and among our overseas suppliers. Not only does the regime give preference to Caribbean and African suppliers, but it provides support for EU producers in the island countries that are designated part of the EU and are particularly closely associated with France and Spain. To support and protect EU and ACP suppliers, the regime limits imports from other sources in Latin America by means of a system of quotas and licences, which has created a series of problems.

The WTO ruling in April requires the EU's regime to be changed. It does not require the removal of tariff preferences for ACP bananas—that is important—nor does it preclude a quota system. Nevertheless, the EU's response could have severe political and economic implications for our historic trading partners in the Caribbean. The Government have made it clear that, in seeking a solution to the dispute, the vulnerable position of the Caribbean states must be fully taken into account.

The WTO ruling has caused difficulties for United Kingdom and other EU exporters that are affected by

[Ms Joyce Quin]

WTO-authorised American sanctions. That is another reason why we need a satisfactory outcome to end the dispute once and for all. There have been some high-profile cases in which sanctions have had a dramatic effect, but some companies in the United Kingdom and other countries, which have been badly affected financially by sanctions, are also victims.

The European Commission's task is not easy. It is seeking a solution that will not be challenged by the WTO but respects the concerns of EU producers, budgetary constraints, the commitment to ACP suppliers, and ensures availability of supplies for consumers.

The Commission has made a proposal that it believes offers the best chance of resolving the dispute and meeting those concerns. As hon. Members have said, it consists of a transitional tariff-rate quota system, followed by a tariff-only regime by January 2006 at the latest. The level of the tariff and the tariff preference for the ACP would be subject to negotiation under procedures laid down by the WTO.

That is important, because the Caribbean countries will need a continuing trade preference to enable them to continue to send their bananas to our market. In turn, they need the agreement of other countries to a waiver from the normal WTO rules, as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford emphasised. Those other countries include rival banana producers in Latin America, which are also developing countries. The task facing the Commission is to persuade them to agree to the new waiver. That is a matter for negotiation and cannot be imposed unilaterally.

A tariff-only regime would be the simplest WTO-compatible regime, but the Caribbean industry would need time to adapt and to restructure. The Commission's proposal could provide that if it were adjusted to reflect their needs. That is the message that the Government and the Caribbean states are making clear.

Dr. Tonge: Does the Minister believe that six years is sufficient time for diversification to take place?

Ms Quin: We would have preferred a longer period. Six years is a compromise and we continue to work for a transitional period and accompanying measures to allow the necessary changes to take place.

The hon. Lady made some important points, but she also suggested differences between her perspective and that of the Government, which do not exist. There is much common ground in the approach of everyone in the House who has taken an interest in the matter.

Mr. Paice: The Minister said that the Government would have preferred a longer transitional period. Is she saying that, because the transitional period is a compromise, there is no possibility of the EU increasing that period and that it will be six years, take it or leave it?

Ms Quin: No, I am not saying that. Discussions are continuing in the EU among the Commission and member states, and the European Parliament must also give its opinion. The length of time and the support for Caribbean countries will be the subject of discussion among the European institutions. In response to the concerns that were expressed at the recent ACP-EU meeting, the Commission must take such matters into account.

Mrs. Gillan: I urge the Minister to reinforce that message with her colleagues. The men who work on the banana farms in, for example, St. Lucia—I have met many of them—face an end to their working life and to the means by which they support their family. This period is of great significance to them—they have to find the funds to re-skill themselves and an educator who can offer them the appropriate opportunities. If the industry comes to an end, they may no longer be able to support their family financially, and their family's honour and integrity may be threatened.

Ms Quin: I appreciate and sympathise with the hon. Lady's points. When we pursue arguments in the European Union, we need to stress the effects of the loss of the banana market on different countries. The ACP-EU debates in the Council mean that many more issues have been aired, but it is still important to consider examples.

Several hon. Members said this morning that few alternatives are available to Caribbean producers and that it may be difficult for them to find an obvious area of diversification. There is also the threat that countries may diversify into the dangerous drug trade. The last thing that we want to do is to add to the problems that have already been caused by the drug trade in that part of the world and elsewhere—with the drugs trade, problems anywhere in the world become our problems.

I was interested in the comments on offshore financial development. We must consider all the possibilities, but we do not want to encourage countries to go down a route that will not be productive in the long term. There may be some room for manoeuvre in the financial services sector, but that would involve the well-trailed discussions in the European Union about finance havens. That issue also needs to be considered on a wider scale, in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and other organisations. We need to consider all the possibilities that are open to Caribbean countries, but we also need to be alert to the dangers of encouraging developments that might bring problems in the long term.

Almost all the interested parties have expressed a preference for a tariff-rate quota system at least for a transitional period, which offers the possibility of reaching an agreement. However, it is in the detail of the management of the quotas that views differ. Most could accept a system of licensing that is based on historical reference periods, although there are differences about which periods should be used. The WTO ruling requires agreement on the reference periods. Without that, an aggrieved party could again challenge the WTO's regime. All sides wish to avoid returning to the WTO. The Commission needs to embark on further discussions with third parties to establish whether common ground can be found, and it needs to do so with persistence and determination.

The UK Government are fully committed to helping the Caribbean countries to restructure their banana

industries in a manner that ensures that those countries become less dependent on banana production and that their banana production becomes more competitive. Virtually all the aid that is available for restructuring and diversification of the banana industry comes from the EU. The UK takes an active role in shaping and monitoring EU assistance through its participation in the donor group. From next year, the main source of funding will be the new special framework of assistance. Under that framework, it is expected that each of the main banana-growing Windward Islands will receive between €6 million and €9 million per year and that Jamaica will receive about €5.3 million. We recognise the importance of providing effective aid.

Several hon. Members discussed the difficulties with EU aid schemes and the effectiveness—or lack of effectiveness—with which aid has been given. The UK Government seek to ensure that aid goes where it is most needed and that it is delivered effectively. There is much frustration with the way in which aid programmes are administered. However, if such programmes can be made effective, the amount of money that is available means that they can make a real difference.

Mr. Wells: The problem with such aid is that it goes not to banana farmers, but to the Governments of those countries, who can use it as they think fit. One does not necessarily target the banana farmer with such aid. We also need to be aware of difficulties with the European Community's aid programme, which is too slow, bureaucratic and unfocused. The Secretary of State for International Development is doing her best to correct that, but it is a serious problem in this context.

Ms Quin: I accept the hon. Gentleman's comments, and I am glad that he recognises that the Government are focusing on the matter. Such aid can be used for restructuring and diversification and for establishing social support programmes for displaced banana growers. We must ensure that the money that is in theory available is used for such purposes. We are seeking to ensure that aid programmes are as effective as possible by using our influence in the European Union and our contacts with Commission officials and the banana-growing countries.

Several hon. Members referred to the meeting of EU and ACP Ministers in Brussels on 7 and 8 December. At that meeting, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development actively advanced the UK's concerns. We achieved several of our objectives for defining across-the-board trading arrangements with the ACP. Following a preparatory period to 2008, new WTO compatible trade arrangements will be introduced. They will comprise regional economic partnership agreements and a safety net for those who are unable to join them. I appreciate that this matter goes slightly wider than the terms of this morning's debate, but I am sure that the Select Committee on International Development will want to examine the agreement between EU Ministers and ACP Ministers to establish how to make progress.

We are encouraged by the fact that the European Commission is speaking to all parties in an effort to find a common way forward. We all want to end this dispute, but much depends on the detail. The Government therefore have to remain on their guard.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford urged me to persist, harry and hassle, and to use every method—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. We must now move on to the next debate.

Financial Services (Rural Areas)

12.30 pm

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Even after decades of cheques and years of credit cards, debit cards and cheque cards, and now even internet settlements, more than 85 per cent. of financial transactions are conducted in cash. Access to real cash—notes and coins—remains essential to our everyday life. Those who live in towns and cities have a variety of ways of obtaining cash; they can go to their banks or building society offices, to post offices, to automatic cash machines and even to supermarkets, which are now willing to provide cash.

It must be acknowledged, however, that access to such financial services in rural areas has become progressively difficult. The general trend of declining rural services and the predominance of commuters and holiday-home owners in many rural areas have devastated the local customer base that is vital to sustain banks and post offices. For instance, in Common Moor in my constituency, the post office closed a year or so ago, and pensioners are now forced once a week to await the arrival of a mobile post office—sometimes in the wind and rain. We wonder how long even that will continue.

I shall highlight the problems experienced by many people in rural areas when attempting to gain access to all sorts of financial services, particularly cash. This is a pertinent time to discuss the matter, as the Government are proposing to alter the way in which benefits are paid. They want to use the automatic credit transfer system to transfer money to bank accounts rather than using the more traditional post office counter transactions. However, many bank branches in towns and rural areas are closing, partly due to mergers but mainly because they are now considered inviable.

Hon. Members are well aware of the problems, and the Government have given us assurances, but the Post Office estimates that nearly half the sub-post offices gain 40 per cent. or more of their custom through making benefit payments. Many sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses are naturally extremely worried that they will be unable to continue in business if they can no longer pay benefits. If the Government go ahead with their proposals, those people will surely see their businesses close. Historically, post offices have been at the heart of rural communities. We must seriously consider the complete picture before we put them under threat, especially because they provide benefits to some of the poorest people.

The Government assure us that they are committed to maintaining a national network of post offices. They say that they intend to negotiate with the banks to allow people to gain access to bank accounts over the post office counter. I assume that nothing has so far been agreed, yet the Government seem committed to going ahead with the proposal. How does the Economic Secretary to the Treasury expect such a system to work? When will post offices find out whether they will be supported? That is particularly important to those who, even now, are contemplating selling up and retiring; they are unlikely to find many buyers until that matter is clearly settled.

If we can take more business to rural post offices, perhaps allowing them to provide banking services to their communities, so much the better; but what are those services, and how financially beneficial are they likely to be? People in rural communities who so desperately need their post offices do not want sophisticated access to largely irrelevant financial services; they want payment of their benefits in cash. The people of Common Moor would be little impressed by a row of automatic telling machines miles away if they could not be paid their pensions when they needed them.

Access to banks is a great problem to many people in rural areas, and I applaud the efforts of some banks, including the Bank of Scotland, which have tried hard to improve accessibility. They have set up community-based banking schemes, installed ATMs in public areas and made bank officials available on certain days to dispense advice. Those schemes are good, but others, such as the Horizon project, have already cost a considerable sum and need further development. Nevertheless, such projects are essential to providing rural communities with better banking facilities.

Those who have a reasonable income and who maintain a healthy bank balance are usually able to look after themselves if banking services are provided. However, the Government-formed policy action team 14 report "Access to Financial Services" reveals some interesting figures. Apparently, 1.5 million households do not use any financial service. In one household in 10, no one has a bank account. Most interestingly the majority of those with no bank account are from low-income households, often on means-tested benefits and living in social housing. Many are over retirement age.

The Government are right to be concerned that such people do not have bank accounts. Access is one barrier, but other major barriers include the banks not wishing to give people accounts and people simply not wanting to have one. Studies show that the unbanked choose not to have an account for a variety of reasons. Some are women who have chosen to let their husbands hold the account. One of the major advantages of the current system of administering child benefit is that it is paid to the mother. How can that continue if the mother does not have a bank account? Would child benefit have to be paid to the husband or partner? The Government may jeopardise the right to choose. Furthermore, many poorer people have to watch every penny and budget in cash, not by bank statement. Many do not have a bank account, either because they do not trust themselves to stay out of debt or because the banks do not provide adequate local services. What can the banks offer them?

Even if choice accounts for some, we cannot ignore the fact that at least 1 per cent. of people are without accounts because they have been refused them. How does the Economic Secretary intend to change the banks' minds? Obtaining a bank account is by no means an automatic process. It is hardly an attractive business proposition to a bank to take on a customer whose account registers £40.70 at the beginning of the week and only a few pence the next day. That proposition will become even less attractive if the account starts to register unauthorised overdrafts or becomes an economic nuisance. Can such people's requirements be met by commercial banks? Banks are private companies, and surely cannot be forced to accept customers.

"Access to Financial Services" notes some key principles. One is non-compulsion. The report states:

"People who do not want bank accounts should not be compelled to have them; and banks' selection of which sections of the market to serve should be left to their commercial judgement."

With that principle in mind, how will the Government achieve the sort of accessibility to benefits payments that is necessary to reach the most disadvantaged parts of rural communities? The Government have promised to talk with the banks, but do they expect to have widened bank account holding and improved access to banking facilities sufficiently by 2005, when the automatic credit transfer scheme should be fully in place? If not, what do they propose?

A further problem with increasing reliance on automatic bank services is that, as proper, manned bank branches continually close, access to other financial services will become much more difficult. An ATM may be able to do a great deal for an account holder in the day-to-day running of a bank account, but it cannot advise on mortgages or home insurance. The policy action team suggests that credit unions might be a way forward. However, even community credit unions may not be viable in sparsely populated rural areas. They are voluntary groups, at present in an embryonic state, and to function properly they require critical mass. That, too, is difficult to achieve in sparsely populated areas.

It seems clear to me that, in their headlong rush to reduce the social security costs of distribution, the Government have failed to consider the wider implications of their decision. Do they seriously expect the banks not to increase their charges when they enjoy a monopoly? Do they think that the possibility of new account holders is likely to stem the closure of rural bank branches? Do they not realise that the bank branches of those vulnerable people who rely on weekly benefits will close, probably because they are not viable, followed shortly by their post offices and perhaps the village shop? What will be the cost of access then—a bus ride into town, perhaps a charge to use a cash machine and greater inconvenience? A few pounds on a social security budget will be saved, but that saving may prove to be only temporary. Transferring the costs of distributing benefit from the Government to those who receive it is simply unacceptable.

Surely it is crystal clear that post offices should become the providers of financial services and continue to pay benefits; it is the banks that are likely to close. The rise of telephone banking services and the installation of automatic cash machines have dramatically reduced bank customers' need to go into their branches. Many of us might not have been inside our bank branch for many weeks or even months. Banks want to pull out of many places, and they will ultimately do so, but post offices want to stay in them. Post offices have a loyal customer base and can provide the low-level cash services that people need daily.

If the Government had any sense, they would use the commercial freedom of post offices and allow them to take over such bank functions. Post offices would start to generate alternative income from providing the banking services that the banks are regularly ceasing to provide. That might ultimately secure a reduced benefit bill to the Department of Social Security. If post offices had a wider range of income, and if they could maintain village stores and provide other services, their reliance on the income derived from benefit payments would be reduced. Vital rural post office stores would be maintained and banks could withdraw a little sooner, while providing their customers with an alternative. Surely that is the sensible way forward.

12.43 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I am delighted to be able to respond to this debate. I understand that the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) used to be a bank manager, so he speaks with considerable authority. I am somewhat distressed to hear that he may not have been inside a bank for some time. That may be part of the problem that the banks face.

As the hon. Gentleman said, better access to financial services is a vital element of rural development and is essential in achieving the Government's wider aims of eliminating social exclusion, which will remain at the top of the Government's agenda. Many people are not able to share the growing prosperity and all the life chances available in our society. Many of them live in deprived urban neighbourhoods, although we know that the problem of access to financial services affects rural as well as urban areas, and not only the poor.

Following the social exclusion unit report on deprived neighbourhoods, "Bringing Britain Together", which was published in 1998, the Treasury established policy action team 14—whose report the hon. Gentleman has referred to—to consider financial services. That report makes it clear that many of the problems of access to financial services are generic, but that they can be solved.

The way forward lies in developing new and alternative means of providing access to financial services, as well as ensuring that existing services can reach all rural and urban communities. The policy action team's report contains more than 40 recommendations, some of which I shall outline. The sheer number of recommendations shows that the problem has no single solution. "One size fits all" cannot be the right approach to the design of products or service outlets, because people's circumstances and preferences vary. Diversity and choice are the watchwords. The banks in particular have a major task ahead of them in extending services to low-income households and developing delivery channels that are accessible to people in areas away from major commercial centres or individual branches.

The Government's full response to the recommendations of all 18 policy action teams will be announced next year as part of the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. However, I shall highlight the recommendations on this matter on which we are making progress.

First, as the hon. Gentleman said, we want to encourage the growth of credit unions, which are much less well developed in Britain then in other countries. Indeed, they are less developed in rural areas than in urban ones.

Mr. Breed: I applaud such encouragement. Will the Economic Secretary consider changing the name "credit

[Mr. Breed]

unions"? It is a terrible misnomer, because they deal with savings rather than credit. Perhaps "community banks" would be better.

Miss Johnson: I am sure that that is a matter for the credit unions themselves, and that they will hear what the hon. Gentleman says.

One of the report's recommendations is the establishment of a new central services organisation to assist the growth of the credit union movement. That organisation will support new and existing credit unions and produce a bigger, stronger credit union movement, which will be assisted by the new supervisory framework and deregulation measures that were announced in November.

Ways will be found to improve the coverage of insurance with rent schemes. We shall work with the industry to develop challenging targets. We want to improve access to affordable credit—perhaps through the Department of Social Security social fund—as well as promoting wider access to debt counselling and refinancing for those who have problems. All those developments could benefit people in rural areas as much as those in towns and cities.

I shall now specifically deal with banking. We have heard about the difficulties faced by people in rural communities that have no bank branches nearby and the issues facing the Post Office. The banks can do much to remove unnecessary barriers, develop the right products, open new delivery channels and provide their customers with better information.

More informed and educated consumers will make better choices about financial services. That is why we have made promoting consumer awareness a statutory objective of the Financial Services Authority under the Financial Services and Markets Bill. Alternatives to conventional bank branches have existed for some time in this country. There is a huge and increasing range of alternatives, such as telephone, internet, supermarket or post office banking, cash machines away from bank branches and banking via digital television.

The Post Office is particularly important in rural areas. In many communities, it is the only retail business and a focal point of village life. The Post Office has 19,000 branches—about 10 times as many as the largest high street bank. The development of banking at the post office is already providing benefits to untold numbers of people in rural communities and has the potential to serve many more in future. Customers of several banks now have the opportunity to carry out bank branch business—transactions that cannot be done over the telephone, such as paying in a cheque or drawing out cash—at the post office. Other banks and building societies could enter into similar partnerships. The decision to computerise the Post Office network, announced at the end of May by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, will enable the Post Office to provide an even broader range of services.

I shall now deal in more detail with some of the questions that the hon. Gentleman raised. It is important to point out that ACT will not be compulsory. I was not sure whether he was implying that it would be, but there is no Government proposal for anything other than a voluntary extension of existing arrangements through computerisation. That will enable people who want ACT to be paid benefits and pensions through a more modern, secure method, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree can be only an advantage to the customer and to the Post Office. The Post Office will continue to pay benefits in cash.

There is a danger that the possible solution is construed—the hon. Gentleman in danger of so construing it—as the problem. We can extend access to banking. The hon. Gentleman referred to the problems of access to banking in rural areas, but the Post Office is part of the solution to that—via a closer relationship between Post Office Counters Ltd. and the banks and building societies, which will build on work being done in that regard. The upshot will be a better service to consumers and to those receiving benefit payments, while cash will still be available. We will ensure that the Post Office develops in a way that leaves it at the heart of rural communities.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about the future of the Post Office network, we said in our White Paper that we would publish access criteria, which the new regulator will have a duty to monitor, that aim to ensure that everyone in the UK has reasonable access to Post Office counter services. That is an appropriate method of dealing with the issue. In addition, the Prime Minister, who has taken a keen interest in the matter, has asked the performance and innovation unit to carry out an urgent study on the Post Office network. That will aim to identify the contribution made by post offices to the wider vitality of our rural and urban communities, consider how the Post Office network can best contribute to the Government's objectives for the future and, in the process, formulate objectives for the future of the network. Much work is therefore in hand and many answers lie in the changes that we face. The new technology can be a means of solving rather than creating problems. We believe that a better service will emerge out of all of this. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is important to look at the complete picture.

On the banks, which was another issue that the hon. Gentleman raised, we are, as he knows, looking at the development of basic accounts by all the main banks. We wish them all to offer basic accounts to all their customers and to ensure that the forms of identity demanded for opening accounts are appropriate and sensitive, so that passports or driving licences are not required if people do not have them. Because of anti-moneylaundering requirements, the banks much check people who are applying for accounts. The hon. Gentleman referred to the fact that some people who do not have bank accounts may not want them.

Mr. Breed: Does the Minister agree that banks sometimes use the demand for particular forms of identity as a means of discouraging potentially uneconomic account holders?

Miss Johnson: The banks have worked closely together, through the British Bankers Association, in drawing up a leaflet of advice about the forms of identity that banks will and can accept that do not in any way conflict with anti-moneylaundering legislation to which we are committed and are keen to see operating. That

will enable people to open accounts with lesser forms of identity. The banks are making every effort to ensure that staff at branch level are aware of and operate those lesser requirements. If there has been a problem in the past, it may have been partly a question of identity documentation, to which we and the BBA have sought to find a solution.

It is also open to local authorities to make arrangements with banks to have cash machines on public premises, visits by mobile bank vehicles or premises for part-time use by service providers. There is considerable scope for initiative and for banks to come up with creative responses. The hon. Gentleman asked how we might change the minds of the banks. The banks are, as they are very well aware, under considerable public pressure on a number of fronts. We do not want to have to legislate, as some have urged, to compel the banks, or financial services, to serve all sections of the community, but if voluntary action and partnership do not lead to the kind of changes and development of options that we think necessary, we may, as we have said, have to consider other options.

Our policies on access to financial services will help people in rural areas as well as tackling the wider questions of financial exclusion in a number of our communities, but there are many other ways in which the Government's policies for rural areas are already making a difference. If I mention a few of them, it will help provide a more complete picture.

The Countryside Agency, which was created in April 1999, provides for an integrated approach to rural issues. We have set up a new Cabinet Committee to co-ordinate policies affecting rural areas, which will help to achieve a fully cross-departmental policy for the countryside. We have also provided an additional £1 million for the Countryside Agency to focus on rural needs, allowing it to do more to help mainstream programmes reflect such needs.

We have also provided for increased public expenditure on rural programmes, from £128 million last year to £146 million in 1999–2000 and £162 million in 2000–01, with a projected £174 million for the following year. We have introduced rate relief for village shops and post offices so that the sole shop or post office in a settlement of fewer than 3,000 people is eligible for 50 per cent. rate relief. We have provided an additional £170 million over three years for rural transport, including new support for rural bus services and encouragement for community transport initiatives.

The combined effect of that funding and of the other measures that I have mentioned is to promote the prosperity and enhance the life of our rural communities. We know that they play an important role and we need to look after those who live in them and meet their needs. We are confident that better access to financial services will be a part of that process.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. Since the Minister is present, we can go on to the next debate.

Driving Instruction Appeals

12.58 pm

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): I welcome the opportunity of raising the issue of the Driving Standards Agency appeals system, which arises from the case of one of my constituents, Ms Donna Kemp, who was indecently assaulted by her driving instructor.

The driving instructor, a Mr. Kevin Hanson, eventually admitted the offence, after being charged by the police. The police and the Crown Prosecution Service eventually saw fit to deal with the matter by administering a caution. Two conditions were attached to the offer of that caution to Mr. Hanson: first, that he admit the offence and, secondly, that the instructor's name be added to the sex offenders register. It was clear that Mr. Hanson's acceptance of the caution constituted an admission of guilt of the offence for which he had been charged.

The DSA informed the driving instructor that he was to be removed from the register of approved driving instructors. He was no longer considered fit and proper to be included in that register—a decision taken by the chief executive of the DSA. The driving instructor appealed against that decision. It was then considered by an appeal board, which recommended that the instructor should be reinstated in the register. In fact, his name was never removed. Even after he had been charged, while the case was being dealt with by South Yorkshire police and the Crown Prosecution Service and throughout the entire appeal process, Mr. Hanson's name remained on the register of approved driving instructors.

The chief executive of the DSA, with whom I raised the issue, told me in his earlier letter that the DSA had tried to remove the instructor, but

> "As the Board's findings were not contrary to law or illogical . . . there was no alternative but to allow the appeal."

The law that applies in such circumstances should be changed. The appeal board's findings could have been classed as illogical. The Minister and the chief executive of the DSA need more powers to review appeal board findings.

The case has raised several issues that relate to the appeal board's findings and need urgent consideration by the Government, such as whether instructors should be allowed to continue to instruct after they have been charged with an offence or during an appeal against being removed from the register. The conduct of appeals boards needs to be examined, as does the evidence that they consider, in view of the paucity of the evidence presented to the appeals board in this case, to which I shall return in a moment. The conduct of the members of an appeal body should be reviewed, in view of the attitude of members of the appeal board in this case. The lack of a mechanism to review decisions made by an appeal body is a cause for concern.

The acting chief executive of the DSA, Laraine Manley, seems to support that view. She informed me in a letter of 15 November:

> "There are various aspects about the way the ADI appeals system operates which also give rise for concern",

referring in particular to an instructor's being allowed to continue instruction during an appeal. I hasten to add that Ms Manley has only recently assumed the position

[Mr. Eric Illsley]

of acting chief executive. The bulk of my correspondence on the case was with the former chief executive, a Mr. Bernard Herdan, who, I understand, now runs the Passport Office.

When I originally raised the issue with the DSA, I received a letter from Mr. Herdan, which stated that the appeal board had been influenced by the decision to administer a caution in relation to the charge and withdraw the case. However, the case was withdrawn on the basis that the instructor had accepted his guilt for the offence and the caution. Nevertheless, the chief executive said that the decision to withdraw the case had had some relevance.

Mr. Herdan went on to say that

"there was no alternative but to allow the appeal."

He continued:

"I have asked the Registrar to monitor the situation closely and should the Agency receive notice of any further complaints against Mr. Hanson or become aware of any subsequent offences, serious consideration would once again be given to his position on the Register."

In other words, the instructor seemed to have got away with it this time, but if he did it again, the process would start again with attempts to remove him from the register.

At that stage, I asked the chief executive for a copy of the appeal board's report. In his reply of 9 June, Mr. Herdan wrote:

"Because of the Data Protection implications and the confidentiality of the Appeal Board's report, I regret that it is not possible to provide you with a copy."

That was clearly not true, as I now have a copy that was faxed to me on Friday, offered by the acting chief executive, Laraine Manley, when she took over responsibility for the case. Why was I initially denied that report, when no data protection implications or confidentiality issues seem to surround the matter?

The chief executive continued, in the same letter:

"The Agency takes very seriously any offence committed by an instructor, particularly those which are of a sexual nature and you can be assured that prompt removal action will continue to be initiated by the Registrar where substantiated reports are received."

What caught my attention in that paragraph was the phrase

"where substantiated reports are received".

That paragraph gives the impression that the charges against Mr. Hanson were unsubstantiated—despite the fact that Mr. Hanson had already accepted the caution, admitted guilt for the offence and been placed on the sex offenders register. At that stage, I began to wonder exactly what the appeal board had been told when it considered the case and whether it was aware of the admission of guilt and the inclusion of the instructor's name on the sex offenders register. I began to question whether the appeal board had been aware that he had admitted the offence and the consequences of that.

I was also rather worried by the belief of my constituent, Ms Kemp, arrived at after she received a letter from the CPS, that the appeal board may have acted in the belief that a caution was administered to deal with the case because of a lack of evidence—in other words, because of the fear that a prosecution brought against the instructor might fail. However, the letter to my constituent from the chief Crown prosecutor in South Yorkshire is clear:

"An experienced Crown Prosecutor carefully considered the evidence. After confirming via the police that you"—

Ms Kemp—

"were willing to give evidence against him"—

the instructor—

"she was satisfied that the evidence was sufficient to provide a realistic prospect of conviction and that it was in the public interest to continue the prosecution."

Clearly, therefore, a substantial case existed against the driving instructor.

In fact, the possibility of dealing with the matter by way of a caution was raised by the driving instructor's own solicitors, who contacted South Yorkshire police and the CPS to ask whether that might be possible. At that point, the police, Ms Kemp and the CPS agreed that that would be a fair way of dealing with the matter. Again, however, I began to worry about whether the appeal board had missed that.

Ms Kemp clearly believes that she should not have agreed to the case being disposed of by a caution. Because the appeal board dismissed the offence as unimportant, she now feels that the admission of the caution diminished the offence and somewhat called her integrity into question.

I wrote again to Mr. Bernard Herdan, the chief executive, to ask whether he believed that the case was substantiated, in view of his reference to substantiated cases. On 28 June, he replied:

"The Registrar's initial decision to remove Mr. Hanson's name from the Register was based on the substantiated evidence against him.

However, as mentioned in my letter of 12 May, the decision to allow Mr. Hanson's name to remain on the Register was based on the recommendations of the Approval Board who heard his case against the Registrar's original decision, not on any re-examination of the evidence by myself or the Registrar."

In other words, the appeal board actually allowed the instructor to deny at the appeal an offence which he had already admitted. The appeal board went on to try a case that the instructor had refused to allow to come to court and he had sought to be dealt with by means of a caution.

By that stage, I had become increasingly concerned at the conduct of the appeal and the appeal body. I raised the issue again with the Driving Standards Agency and also sought this debate. On 15 November, the acting chief executive, Laraine Manley, wrote and offered to let me see the appeal board report, while also expressing her concern about the appeals procedure, as I have mentioned. The report was not enclosed with the letter and I received it on Friday.

The appeal board report makes interesting reading. Paragraph 2 refers to all charges against the driving instructor being withdrawn. The charges were withdrawn after Mr. Hanson had admitted the offence and accepted the caution.

Perhaps the most damning paragraph is the third, which states:

"We have not seen a copy of the charge, or the evidence put together by the Police and Crown Prosecution Service. We only have seen a press report of an interview given by the pupil after the charge had been dropped. We have heard evidence from Mr Hanson."

The appeal body does not even mention the papers prepared for it by the DSA that were referred to in correspondence to me. All it had seen was a press report—nothing from the Crown Prosecution Service and nothing from the police. I consider that evidence to be one-sided. Throughout the appeal, the body was influenced by a press report. Why did the appeal board not seek to interview or take a statement from Ms Kemp? Why did it not ask to see police documents or a report from the Crown Prosecution Service on the incident?

The fourth paragraph of the report begins:

"We are prepared to accept the following facts".

It goes on to say that the indecent assault was sufficiently minor, despite the fact that the Crown Prosecution Service believed that it had a case against the driving instructor that it was prepared to pursue. In paragraph 4(c), the appeal board accepts as fact a statement that the police interviewed more than 20 female pupils of Mr. Hanson. There is no way in which the appeal board could know that, let alone accept it as fact, but to ask Mr. Hanson itself, because it had no documentation from the police whatever. The paragraph states that

"Mr. Hanson's chance of maintaining his innocence must be rated as high",

despite the fact that he had accepted the caution and admitted guilt of the offence.

Paragraphs 4(c), (d), (e) and (f) of the report are all about evidence given by Mr. Hanson to the appeal body during the hearing; he was the only person before it apart from his partner. Paragraph 4(f) refers to Ms Kemp contacting the newspaper having discovered that the instructor was to be cautioned. The idea of the newspaper article runs throughout the appeal.

Paragraph 5 begins:

"Mr. Hanson maintained his innocence to us, denying most vehemently that he had even attempted to indecently assault Ms Kemp".

It would appear that the appeal board accepted that denial and that it tried Mr. Hanson's case, basically accepting that he was not guilty. If Mr. Hanson had been so sure of his innocence, why did he not let the case come to trial?

Paragraph 7 states that, where impropriety with a pupil is alleged, careful consideration must be made about removing an instructor's name. Impropriety was not alleged in this case: the driving instructor had admitted it. The allegation had gone from a charge to an acceptance of a caution. Paragraph 8 finally states that the board believed that not removing

"Mr. Hanson's name from the Register will not bring...the Agency into disrepute".

I wonder how wrong the board thinks that it was.

The appeal board's report was accepted by the chief executive, despite its one-sided nature. The appeal body did not take evidence other than that from the instructor, which it believed and referred to as fact. It obviously did not believe anything that my constituent said or did in relation to the incident. It believed that a caution lessened the offence of indecent assault, ignored the instructor's admission of guilt and allowed him to deny the offence and basically try the case in the appeal hearing. The appeal board members were obviously influenced by a newspaper article rather than official documentation that could have been made available to them.

I believe that the case highlights major deficiencies in the running of the Driving Standards Agency, in which there appears to be no clear policy in relation to such incidents. It also highlights deficiencies in the appeal system. The registrar and the Minister should have clear guidelines with regard to the removal of an instructor's name from the register of approved driving instructors. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider those issues.

1.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) for raising this important matter, which affects wider issues than the case to which he referred. I entirely share his concern about the way in which the case, which has not appeared previously before Ministers, has been handled, and I understand why he and Ms Kemp are extremely unhappy.

My hon. Friend asked why he was originally told that he could not have a copy of the appeal board judgment. That was based on a misunderstanding of data protection legislation, and has been rectified by the fact that he has now received it.

Before I deal with the case raised by my hon. Friend, I should explain the background to the regulation of driving instructors. For road safety and consumer protection reasons, anyone offering paid car-driving instruction must have his or her name entered on the register of approved driving instructors, as has been the case since 1970.

The registrar, an official of the Secretary of State, administers the register on behalf of my Department. The function is now part of the Driving Standards Agency, which is an executive agency of the Department.

To be accepted as registered instructors, applicants must satisfy the registrar that they are of good character and must pass a three-part qualifying exam. That consists of a theory test and practical tests of driving and instruction ability. On payment of a £200 registration fee, a successful applicant is accepted on to the register for four years. At the end of the four-year period, instructors can apply to renew the registration. Standards supervision is an important part of maintaining public confidence in the register. Instructors are required to take regular check-tests every two to four years depending on the standard shown at the previous test.

Failing a check-test does not lead automatically to exclusion. The system is intended to help instructors identify and overcome weaknesses. Following an unsatisfactory test, the examiner who conducted it offers the instructor a briefing and the opportunity to take remedial training to rectify the faults identified. A second check-test is conducted after an interval, usually of three to six months. If that second test proves unsatisfactory, a more senior examiner, who is given no details about why the instructor failed the two preceding tests, conducts a third test. Only if the instructor's performance on the third test in unsatisfactory are removal proceedings started.

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

Some 48,000 check-tests have been conducted over the past four years and only 254 of the instructors who failed the initial test were subsequently unsuccessful in their efforts to raise standards and were removed from the register. The failure rate for check-tests is about 8 per cent. on the first attempt, but falls to about 1 per cent. on the third attempt. Currently, 29,000 instructors are on the register, with a further 18,500 people in the process of qualifying.

The conduct regime applies as long as an instructor is registered. The registrar needs to ensure that behaviour that would bring the register into disrepute is not tolerated. Obviously motoring offences are relevant, but so are matters of personal conduct of the type to which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central referred today. We should not forget that driving tuition occurs in relatively isolated circumstances in a car and often involves vulnerable young people. Any system of supervision and enforcement needs to strike a balance.

Driving instructors have a right to expect that their supervision arrangements are fair and proportionate. They have a right to expect an independent appeals handling process when their livelihood is threatened. Equally, the public have a legitimate expectation that driving instructors should deliver a reliable and satisfactory standard of tuition. They also expect swift and decisive action in cases of personal misconduct by instructors.

The registrar's decision to deregister an instructor is subject to an independent appeals procedure. Instructors can ask for their case to be reviewed by an appeal board, which is chaired by a person with a legal background who is approved by the Lord Chancellor's Department. The board makes recommendations to the Secretary of State. Once an appeal has been made, an instructor can continue to offer tuition until the Secretary of State issues his decision. Since 1992, the chief executive of the Driving Standards Agency has had delegated authority to determine appeal cases without reference to Ministers when there is no intention to depart from the appeal board's recommendations. We are conscious that different interests have expressed several concerns about the supervision and appeal arrangements. As I said at the outset, I share those concerns, given the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent.

Some instructors have complained that it is difficult for an instructor who fails a check-test to challenge the examiner's assessment and the appeals systems does not command confidence. However, the instructor's position is protected by the triple check-test procedure, which I have just outlined. Even if the instructor's standards are found wanting on three successive occasions, the instructor can still appeal to an independent appeal board. There are also public concerns that the current arrangements are not tough enough when dealing with instructors whose performance is unsatisfactory, either in the quality of the instruction or in their conduct. There has also been criticism that current arrangements allow instructors to continue operating while they drag out the appeals procedure, a point referred to by my hon. Friend.

In the case to which my hon. Friend referred, the driving instructor was charged with indecent assault on a pupil during a lesson and he accepted a formal caution from the police. When the registrar became aware of the case, he wrote to the instructor advising him that, in view of the offence, his removal from the register was proposed. The instructor appealed. At the appeal board, the instructor pleaded that he had accepted a caution only to avoid the cost, publicity and anxiety of fighting the case. That, together with testimonials from other female pupils and his employer, persuaded the board to recommend that the instructor should not be removed from the register. The board's view was that allowing the appeal would not bring the register into disrepute.

The recommendation was accepted. The then chief executive of the Driving Standards Agency accepted the board's recommendation and the instructor was notified that his name would be allowed to remain on the register. In accordance with agreed procedures, the case was not referred to Ministers. I recognise that my hon. Friend has been expressing his concern to the Driving Standards Agency since that decision was issued earlier this year and I deeply regret the distress that has been caused to his constituent. The outcome of the case is no reflection on her integrity. However, as due process has been followed and the decision has been taken and issued—however unsatisfactorily—I regret to say that the case cannot be re-opened.

I reassure hon. Members that the Government are not complacent about the matter. We are working to avoid the risk of instructors concealing their misconduct. The registrar now requires them to provide references when applying for registration, but the system is still too reliance on self-declaration. The registrar can check records for motoring offences at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, but he has no access to the police national computer to check for other types of conviction. That will be remedied when the Criminal Records Bureau becomes operational. At that point, the registrar can require applicants to supply certificates showing an absence of relevant convictions.

Most of the complaints that the registrar receives from members of the public about instructors relate to relatively minor matters, and may be misunderstandings. The registrar seeks to act as honest broker in such cases. To avoid problems, the registrar has worked in partnership with the national Driving Instructors Association to develop a code of practice and has invited all instructors to sign up to its principles. About 4,000 instructors have done that so far. The Government also want the appeals process modernised.

All parties have an interest in the prompt resolution of cases. Obviously, an instructor facing loss of livelihood should be able to expect his or her appeal to be resolved speedily and effectively. Equally, the appeals system should not leave the public at risk by enabling failing or undesirable instructors to ply their trade for longer than necessary. Others in the profession must also be able to expect that the registrar will act promptly, and thus help maintain public confidence in the system.

To ensure swift action, the Driving Standards Agency has adopted active case management for appeals, with an internal target for issuing the decision within 13 weeks from the date of receipt of the appeal. The Government are also considering whether an instructor convicted of serious offences, but who wishes to appeal

against deregistration, should be able to offer driving lessons while the appeal is being considered—a matter that my hon. Friend raised. However, perhaps conviction for some offences should constitute an absolute bar to registration.

We are considering whether it would be better for appeal boards to decide appeals cases, instead of just making recommendations with recourse to the courts on any point of law. Many of the ideas that I have floated in this debate would require legislation and that must depend on the competing pressures for legislative time. The details will need to be carefully thought through. They will need to fit in with our broader plans to modernise driving training for different sectors.

I am sorry to say that I cannot offer my hon. Friend further reassurance about the case that he has raised, beyond saying that I share his dissatisfaction. He has, however, highlighted some issues that will be addressed. If they require legislation—some of them will—that will depend on legislative time. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue and I repeat that I share his dissatisfaction about the way in which this particular case was handled.

Special Educational Needs

1.29 pm

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): It is one of the great privileges of being a Member of Parliament that, every now and again, one comes across an issue of profound importance that one would not have come across had one pursued a more conventional career.

There is such an issue in my constituency. I am referring to the Edinburgh Road special school in Holt. It is special in a number of ways—because of the children, parents, teachers and staff. There are about 35 children at the school, the youngest of whom is three and the oldest 19. They all have statements of special educational need. The majority have severe learning difficulties and approximately one third have profound and multiple learning difficulties. A further 34 children attend special schools in Norwich because there is no room at Edinburgh Road, although they live closer to Holt.

These children are among the most vulnerable and fragile in our society. Many of them will be wholly dependent on others throughout their life, and will never enjoy a quality of independent life that most of us take for granted. They deserve the best that we can give them. Society has an obligation to provide the best possible education and surroundings, to give them the best possible chance in life.

We are letting down these children at the Edinburgh Road school, and have been doing so for a number of years. We are also letting down the staff, who have a record of commitment and dedication second to none; they have worked wonders with generations of children in very difficult circumstances. We are also letting ourselves down because it is in our power to make a difference and to make the school better.

The 1996 Office for Standards in Education report summarises the problem when it states:

> "The quality of education provided is affected by the inadequate accommodation. The school building is too small for the number and range of pupils on roll. There is a lack of specialist teaching areas and very little space for storage. There are too few toilets and changing rooms. The school does not have suitable outdoor areas for play, sport or recreation. As a result, education decisions are often driven by accommodation problems, rather than by the needs of pupils."

Those words are inevitably rather dry and impersonal, so I shall give the Minister more of a flavour of the problems at the school.

There is only one toilet area, within which there is no privacy. Many of the children have to be helped extensively, often using a hoist, and many are incontinent. No privacy means no dignity. There is no playground worth the name, nowhere for the children who can walk to let off steam and play, and certainly no room for those in wheelchairs, of whom there are many. The confined space may lead to more behavioural problems. Jill Measures, the head of the school, who is one of the unsung heros of Norfolk, describes the position as sometimes akin to a pressure cooker.

The age range of the children—between three and 19—makes them difficult to teach, and would do so even if they did not have special needs. The conditions would not be tolerated in a mainstream school. There is no medical room for when a child feels ill. There is no quiet

[Mr. David Prior]

room in which a child may calm down. There is no music room, or a room for indoor drama. There is no staff room. There is no communal dining area, so the older children have to eat in a caravan, which is parked outside the school, and which is also used for speech therapy.

The corridors are narrow and virtually impassable, with wheelchairs parked along both sides. The staff talk openly of the school breaching health and safety regulations and posing a fire hazard. The children have to travel to off-site facilities for swimming or physical education. The nearest high school is five miles away, which makes any meaningful inclusion with a mainstream school impractical. The building was never designed to be a school, let alone one for children with special needs. Originally, it was a junior training centre.

The children, their parents and teachers are getting a raw deal, which is starting to tell on their morale. The teachers do a wonderful job in Dickensian surroundings, but it is not fair and it is not right to expect them to do so. It would not be acceptable in a mainstream school, so why should it be acceptable for a special school?

At the end of 1997, the Government produced a Green Paper, "Excellence for All Children". It was followed in November 1998 by a programme for action. This year's Queen's Speech promised legislation to improve the education of children with special educational needs. I applaud those initiatives, and the commitment, which I hope is real, that the Minister has made to backing them up with financial support. I especially support the Government's commitment to inclusion and shall quote from the section in the Green Paper entitled "Increasing Inclusion". It states:

"The ultimate purpose of SEN provision is to enable young people to flourish in adult life. There are therefore strong educational, as well as social and moral, grounds for educating children with SEN with their peers. We aim to increase the level and quality of inclusion within mainstream schools, while protecting and enhancing specialist provision for those who need it. We will redefine the role of special schools to bring out their contribution in working with mainstream schools to support greater inclusion."

The Green Paper's vision for the future of special schools and the encouragement of greater co-operation with mainstream schools is one that I hope we all share. It has inspired the Norfolk education authority, the Edinburgh Road school, the local schools at Sheringham and many others to develop a new future for Edinburgh Road special school. The matter has been in the melting pot for five years, which has meant five years of disappointment, frustration and false starts.

However, a firm proposal is with the Minister today, which envisages a new, purpose-built special school for five to 16-year-olds on the same campus as Sheringham primary school and high school. There will be room for 70 children, who will share many facilities with the primary and the high school. If feasible, children from the special school will be included in mainstream lessons and activities. Staff in the special and mainstream schools will be trained so that they can all help each other.

The benefits of co-location will be a two-way process. The special school will seek to become a centre of excellence, used by all the local schools. There will be provision for 10 nursery-age children with SEN. They will be taught on a fully inclusive basis in the nursery in the primary school. Staff from the specialist school and the primary school will work together in the nursery. There will also be provision in the sixth form for 10 post-16-year-old students with SEN, using independent accommodation attached to the high school, but there will be full inclusion when possible.

I hope that I have given the Minister a flavour of the vision of the future of Edinburgh Road school. It is a flagship project for Norfolk, representing a great commitment to these special children. "Excellence for All Children" is the title of the Green Paper, but it is our vision too. We want inclusion when possible, and specialist separate accommodation when it is not.

In my letter to the Minister on 7 December, I concluded as follows:

"This is one of those opportunities which dwarfs the normal cut and thrust of politics. It is an opportunity to give a better chance in life for thousands of severely disabled children, and by bringing them into mainstream schools, where possible, to enrich the education and increase the understanding of other children. In the long run, this is the best possible way to establish the rights of disabled people as equal partners in our society."

That is an objective that we all share.

The status quo at Edinburgh Road school is unsustainable, unfair and unacceptable. A firm proposal has now been framed and it is in tune with the Government's philosophy of excellence in education for all. I hope that the Minister will support it.

1.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) on securing the debate and raising an issue that is so important to his constituency. I agree with him that the Government have inherited much work that will be necessary to provide the requisite standards of education for children with special educational needs.

One of the first issues tackled by the Government after the election was the education of children with special educational needs. As the hon. Member for North Norfolk mentioned, within months of October 1997 we published the Green Paper "Excellence for All Children" and followed that in November 1998 with "Meeting Special Educational Needs: A Programme of Action". We have continued to work hard to put in place a system for children with special educational needs that will enable them to receive the education that they deserve, as part of the Government's overall drive to improve standards for all children. I am pleased to note the hon. Gentleman's broad welcome of what we are trying to achieve in our broader programme of action.

The hon. Gentleman made clear his concern about the future of Edinburgh Road special school and, in particular, his strong support for the recent proposal by Norfolk local education authority to relocate the school to a new site in Sheringham. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for spelling out that proposal. I would also like to take this opportunity to commend the head teacher, the staff, parents and children for the work that is going on in that school when the circumstances of the accommodation are so difficult.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the general position on formal proposals to open, alter or close a special school is that, with effect from 1 September, responsibility for considering such proposals transferred from the Secretary of State to local school organisation committees, provided the local education authority had an agreed schools organisation plan in place. Norfolk LEA had not agreed a school organisation plan by early November: hence the proposals for the Edinburgh Road special school will be decided by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

It might help if I explained the timetable of consideration for such proposals—

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): I assume that the hon. Gentleman has permission to speak from the hon. Member for North Norfolk, who proposed the Adjournment.

Mr. Prior *indicated assent.*

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister, but I may have missed her point about transferring the responsibility for closing special schools. Will mainstream schools remain the responsibility of the Secretary of State and the transfer apply only to special schools, or am I wrong on that?

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. Under the new arrangements for statutory proposals from 1 September, responsibility for the development of school organisation plans is given to local education authorities and responsibility for decisions about individual proposals and specific plans is given to school organisation committees. The hon. Gentleman will recall that, when he intervened in Education questions, I pointed out that school organisation committees will include some special schools representatives when statutory proposals are discussed.

The position in Norfolk is different because the school organisation plan had not been agreed by the time that the particular plan for the school was proposed. The proposal was published on 22 October and a statutory period of two months follows in which objections can be made. The LEA then has a further month for my Department to receive copies of any objections, together with its comments on those objections. If there are objections to the Edinburgh Road school proposal, we would expect to receive the LEA's comments by 22 January.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also receives advice from Her Majesty's inspectorate on all such reorganisation proposals and he will need to consider that advice, the case made by the LEA and the points, if any, made by objectors. He will also need to take account of advice from the Department's professional architects on the capital building proposals.

I have described the standard procedures for dealing with proposals. The hon. Member for North Norfolk will appreciate that the procedure takes time, but helps to ensure that the Department gives thorough consideration to all proposals and enables people or organisations to comment. I am afraid that, at this stage, I cannot give any indication of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's view of the Edinburgh Road school proposal, which could be viewed as prejudicing his decision. I can say, however, that he hopes to announce his decision by next spring. I recognise that the hon. Member for North Norfolk not only is anxious for the Secretary of State to approve the Edinburgh Road proposal, but wants to ensure that the Department makes available a capital allocation to Norfolk to cover the costs of the proposed building work.

The position is not completely straightforward, but I shall attempt to explain it. LEAs are required to bid for capital cover in the annual capital guidelines round, as Norfolk LEA has done regarding the Edinburgh Road school proposals. However, an allocation for such a project would be made only if the Secretary of State had approved the statutory proposal that was linked to it.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk will know that capital allocations for 2000–01 were made earlier this week and Norfolk's allocation did not include cover for this project. The Department has nevertheless retained a capital reserve on a national basis, which can be released during the year to LEAs whose proposals are approved later. The hon. Gentleman will understand from all that I have said that I cannot comment specifically on the Edinburgh Road school proposals because I cannot pre-empt the Secretary of State's decision. I can gladly assure the hon. Gentleman that in reaching his decision, my right hon. Friend will take fully into account his comments today and those set out in his recent letter to my noble Friend the Minister for Education and Employment.

Mr. Prior: How big is the capital reserve set aside for projects that were not framed in time for the earlier allocation?

Jacqui Smith: I shall come to the issue of funding later.

It may be useful to reiterate the Government's general policy on the education of children with special educational needs, which is also relevant to the particular application. We are firmly committed to promoting inclusion by choice—a cornerstone of our strategy for raising standards of achievement and meeting the educational needs of all children. We are determined to maintain the progress to which the hon. Member for North Norfolk alluded, which enables more parents to feel confident that their child's needs can and will be met in a mainstream school. We intend to use the Special Educational Needs Bill announced in the Queen's Speech to strengthen the right to a mainstream place.

Our approach has been practical, not dogmatic, and the key objective must be to safeguard the interests of all children and to ensure that they achieve their full potential. When parents want a mainstream setting for their child, it is our policy to try to provide it. Equally, where more specialist provision is sought, it is important and right that parents' wishes are respected.

[Jacqui Smith]

We have emphasised that there is a continuing and vital role for specialist provision, often within special schools. The Government have stressed in the past, and it is worth repeating in this context, that inclusion is not an agenda for the wholesale closure of special schools. We want them to become outward-looking centres of excellence that work hand in hand with their mainstream partners to support pupils who would benefit from a mainstream place. The right of parents to make a positive choice and to express a preference for a special school place will be fully maintained.

We acknowledge that, as the hon. Member for North Norfolk noted, a mainstream place might never be right for some children. For those whose needs cannot be met within the main stream, there must be a range of high-quality provision. There must also be strong links between special schools and neighbouring mainstream schools so that pupils in special schools have ample opportunities to mix with their peers and friends in mainstream schools. We are encouraging local authorities to consider innovative ways of joining up mainstream and specialist schools.

The importance that we attach to promoting inclusion and developing provision for children with special educational needs is underlined by a range of initiatives that are designed to help schools to develop their practice and become more inclusive. Those initiatives are also designed to build the links that I described between special and mainstream schools.

For example, a special mainstream links working group was established in September and draws together a range of special and mainstream head teachers and other interested parties. I am pleased to tell the hon. Member for North Norfolk that one of its members comes from Norfolk. The group is producing an interactive CD-Rom package that is aimed at teachers. The idea is that it will be a starting point, and that it will encourage discussion and then action to develop stronger links between the two sectors and to support inclusion. It will focus on a range of issues, including the new outreach role that we want special schools to develop, dual registration and reintegration. The package will be launched next summer at a series of seminars to be organised jointly by the National Association for Special Educational Needs and my Department.

The SEN regional co-ordination projects, which are being expanded to cover the whole of England by early next year, are also helping to establish better links between mainstream and special schools. The projects bring together groups of local authorities and other local partners. Through collaborative planning and working, they aim to redress variations in access to and quality of provision and services for pupils with special needs. Norfolk is part of the eastern project, which will come on stream fully in April. We are beginning to evaluate the projects, and we aim to publish details of initial good practice towards the end of the summer term 2000.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk rightly raised the importance of funding to support special educational needs provision, and I want to outline the Government's commitment in that respect. I reiterate that the Government fully recognise that all the relevant initiatives will require funding. We are supporting expenditure of £35 million in the current financial year under the SEN element of the standards fund. That will increase to £55 million in the financial year 2000–01. We plan a further large increase for the following year.

Part of the standards fund's purpose is to support innovative local inclusion and emotional behavioural difficulties projects. Some £8 million has been made available this year. That will be nearly doubled to £15 million in 2000–01. Many of the projects aim to join up the mainstream and specialist sectors to better meet pupils' needs. The standards fund money is also being used to train staff to support parent partnership schemes and speech and language therapy projects.

Furthermore, I was pleased to be able to announce earlier this week that we are making £30 million available under the schools access initiative in 2000–01. That represents a 50 per cent. increase on the previous year's funding. The money has been allocated to improve access to education for children with special needs, including disabled children and those with sensory impairments. Over the three-year programme to 2002, we expect to allocate £100 million for access projects.

I have also announced increased support for capital projects to improve facilities for pupils with special educational needs. Funding will increase from £16 million in the current year to £21 million in 2000–01. I can tell the hon. Member for North Norfolk that the capital reserve for special educational needs projects stands at £15 million.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the forthcoming Special Educational Needs Bill, which was announced in the Queen's Speech. It will take forward the Government's proposals, which were set out in our programme of action. It is designed to raise the standards of achievement of all children with special needs. It will impove services to parents by establishing better parent partnership arrangements and introduce new conciliation procedures to resolve disputes between parents and local education authorities. It will reinforce the powers of the special educational needs tribunal and promote inclusion by strengthening the right of children with special educational needs to be educated in mainstream schools, where that is in accordance with their parents' wishes. It will also introduce changes to the SEN code of practice.

I hope that I have convinced the hon. Member for North Norfolk that the Government take the education of children with special educational needs seriously. It is something that we have taken seriously, acted on and funded. There are no easy answers, and I am sorry that I have been unable to give a direct response to the specific proposal that has been made. However, I hope that I have shown that the measures that I described will go a long way to ensure that the requirements of children with special educational needs will be met effectively under this Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 December 1999

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Child Care

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. McNulty.*]

2.30 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): First, I apologise to those who will speak in the debate and to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I shall leave in about an hour. A cross-party delegation is coming from Cornwall to discuss what it considers to be the area's unfavourable financial circumstances. I need to go and persuade members of the delegation that their circumstances are in fact perfectly fair and perfectly favourable. I apologise for that, but the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), will listen to the whole debate and respond in due course.

I welcome this opportunity to discuss what I am sure all parties will agree is the important subject of early years and child care. It is important for many reasons. First and foremost, those of us with a brief in education and raising standards know that all the evidence shows that investment in the early years is investment well made. That is especially true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, whose parents are unable to give them the support that all parents want to give but some find difficult to provide.

The second reason why the issue is important is that we live in changing times. Parents—both mothers and fathers—want to choose how they live their lives. They want a family and working opportunities; indeed, for some, that is not a choice, but a necessity. There have been changes in social circumstances, and sometimes family members do not live together or close to each other as they did a generation ago. Such changes have, rightly, put child care much higher up the political agenda. I suspect that those words, if not the rest of what I have to say, will find agreement across all parties.

The Government have established child care as a major strand of their school standards agenda, of their family-friendly policy and of economic and competitive policy. To coin a phrase, it requires joined-up thinking more than many other areas of Government activity. Despite that, when we took office two and a half years ago, we inherited a system that was deeply fragmented and that had not made the best use of the resources that had been allocated to it. It was in disarray. In our first few months in government we dismantled the nursery voucher scheme, and we were able to use the money that was made available, in the first instance, to provide nursery places for all four-year-olds.

During the past two decades, under the previous Government, whether one got an early-years place depended on where one lived rather than on whether one needed a place. If we consider the spread of early-years places across the country at that time, we find a good match between Labour-controlled local authorities and areas with a high percentage of three and four-year-olds in nursery places. That political argument apart, it was clear that parents in many areas wanted access to early years and child care, but there were insufficient places.

Our main aims and objectives for early years and child care policies have been to increase the number of places and to ensure that that increase is based on good-quality places. It is no good expanding the number of places if we put more children in settings in which the quality of provision is poor.

We have recognised that many people who work in the early-years sector do a good job and have a good qualification. However, there is not the same semblance of order to qualifications in the early-years sector as in many other vocational areas. Over the past two and a half years, we have sought to bring some semblance of order to early-years qualifications. We want to do that not only for those who work in early years, but for those who use the service. It is especially important to ensure that there are avenues of progression for those with an early-years qualification—it is not a qualification that leads nowhere.

We were keen to bring together early-years education and child care. There is sometimes an academic argument about the difference between the two. However, under-fives probably make no distinction between child care and education. Parents need both and need to fit them in with the rest of their lives.

After two and a half years, how can we judge whether we have made progress on those objectives? We are pleased to say that one of the first pledges that was fully delivered was to provide a part-time place for all four-year-olds who wanted one. I want to pay tribute now and in many other comments to the early-years development and child care partnerships, which brought that about. It was difficult in the first year to move from a system of early-years provision that was based on competition to one that was based on co-operation. The same providers who had been competing for children because children meant money were asked a short time later to work together to plan places across an area. Different partnerships succeeded at different rates and at different levels and some did better than others in the first year. However, I am grateful that all but two produced a partnership plan that we could approve in the first year. That made it possible for our four-year-olds to have places.

We have now set another objective and want to double the number of places for our three-year-olds by 2002. Currently, we are on target to ensure that 50 per cent. of our three-year-olds have access to a free early education place by 2000 and 2001. We are also on target to double the figure for provision from 34 to 66 per cent. by 2002. We have done that in two ways. It was important to target the first tranche of money at areas of significant deprivation and challenge, where the impact would be greatest. However, by next year, every area will have had some money to expand the number of places for three-year-olds. By 2002, a uniform 66 per cent. will not have been achieved across the board in every local authority. Rather, I suspect and hope that some local authorities will make almost universal provision for three-year-olds. However, some will not.

[Ms Estelle Morris]

None the less, the pledge is that we shall double provision to 66 per cent. I pay tribute again to the partnerships. In their second year of operation, they were asked to take on planning for three-year-olds in addition to continued planning for four-year-olds.

We have also acted on the qualifications. It is easy for politicians to talk about making sense of early-years qualifications, but it is much more difficult for practitioners, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and all the training boards to do that. I am delighted that we are beginning to make progress in that regard. The process will be on-going and we shall constantly want to examine qualifications.

We shall also want to do some work on the next stage of our agenda. The Green Paper on the reform of the teaching profession made it clear that my aim is for people to be able to go into early-years education and to gain any qualification and then to have the opportunity to be a fully qualified teacher if they so wish. The skills, attributes and experience that people gain from working in early-years settings mean that they would make good teachers. Although we need the most skilled people where their skills are most important, in the early years we currently have a range of people with perhaps lower-level skills and qualifications than we would want.

Hon. Members will welcome the fact that we shall introduce legislation next week in the House of Lords to ensure that we have a coherent inspection framework. Fragmentation in provision was mirrored in the inspection framework. We cannot really tell providers, "Work together in the interests of all the children in your area. By the way, we are going to inspect you using different standards." That approach has put extra pressure on those who work in the early-years service, and our proposals have been welcomed.

I suppose that the same is true in early years as in every other area of education: there is already excellent provision. Good practice and first-class practitioners exist across the country in urban and rural areas, cities and towns and in authorities that are controlled by the Labour party, the Conservative party or even the Liberal Democrats. As always, the challenge is to ensure that we raise the standards of those who are poor to the level of the best. We have tried in early years, as we have across the school agenda, to enable those who are good to share their good practice with others.

The early excellence centres are one important initiative. They are examples of good quality; they are beacons, which show what can be done. It would have been easy for them to keep that extra resource to themselves, but the first tranche of early excellence centres, which have been designated for 18 months to two years, have done outward-looking work, sharing their good practice with others. We could put everything on paper and write documents about raising standards. However, I suspect that it is better to allow those practitioners needing support to look at centres that work well and learn from them. Networks have been built up by good practitioners sharing their practice with others, and I hope that that model will spread in future.

We pledged to designate 25 early-excellence centres by 2002. If memory serves me right—if not, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will doubtless correct me—we have designated 20 already. That is huge progress in two and a half years: we have ensured that centres of excellence exist and serve others.

Finally, it is difficult to bring together early-years provision and child care. It is even more of a challenge to bring together early-years provision, child care, health, special needs provision, support for parents and other essential early-years elements so that we support families bringing up children. One of our proudest achievements in relation to that is sure start, which is one of the best examples of Government and Whitehall interdepartmental work. Departments began by asking: "What do families and children aged nought to three need? How can we organise ourselves to best deliver that?" I very much hope—as does the Secretary of State—that evaluation of sure start will result in a model to be taken elsewhere.

We are anxious that support such as early-years provision does not stop when children reach the age of five because the needs of parents and children continue until the latter reach eight, 14, or become independent. In that age range, we have achieved extra child care places in after-school provision and provided more out-of-school learning opportunities. In two and a half years, we have got rid of competition, introduced co-operation, raised core standards and improved quality in early-years provision. We have also begun to make nought to eight provision coherent, meeting a range of needs for young people and their parents.

We acknowledge that young people's needs go beyond that; indeed, the ideal is a seamless service. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and I are reporting on progress so far, which has been good and has been noted by many working in the sector, parents and children—the latter being those who will benefit.

I have paid tribute to the work done by early-years partnerships, who were groups of people making decisions. I also want to pay tribute to a wide range of early-years providers in the maintained, private and voluntary sectors, along with those who care for children—whether singly or in large groups. That is a diverse group and long may that continue. The differences between those people are important, so our challenge is to use all their skills, experience and anything else that they may offer. We must send them a clear message that they are part of an overall policy to provide high-quality child care—from early years until education—for an important group of people to whom we have a great obligation: youngsters aged nought to five.

2.44 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I join the Minister in welcoming this opportunity to debate an important matter. I, too, recognise how important this subject is to many people, including working families. Indeed, I shall declare common ground, as the Opposition share the objective of offering high-quality child care provision. The Minister spoke about the importance of such provision; indeed, she described it as a major strand of Government policy. I am therefore mildly curious—no more than that—about why the Government chose to debate the matter in Westminster Hall.

Having joined the Minister on common ground, recognising the significance of the matter and sharing objectives, I shall look at the whole child care picture and raise issues of concern to many in the field. We should look not only at certain projects—however good—but at what is happening in all parts of the country and throughout child care provision.

The Government are not short of promises in that area, especially on making provision for child care for those aged nought to eight. Indeed, the Minister recognised the importance of that for working families. In "Meeting the Childcare Challenge", published in May 1998, the Prime Minister said that the Government wanted to improve provision and create

"more than 50,000 childcare places this year".

The Government's annual report for 1998–99 promises

"the first ever national childcare strategy"

and

"up to a million new childcare places".

In the context of those promises, the expectations that they create and the projects mentioned by the Minister, we want to know how well those pledges have been delivered in 1999, the Government's year of delivery.

I noted the pretty picture painted by the Minister. However, the most recent statistics from the Department for Education and Employment by no means paint so rosy a picture. Child care provision for children under eight is divided into several sectors, and a distinction is made between provisions for children under eight and for children aged five to seven, who are, of course, of school age. On provision for the under-eights—to which the Minister referred—statistics for child care provision in Britain show that the number of places in day nurseries has increased by 24,000. However, Sir Alan, they also show that the number of places in playgroups has decreased by 36,000 or so, and that the number of places provided by child minders has gone down. Therefore, the whole picture shows an overall reduction in the number of child care places of about 45,000. That is far from the increase of 50,000 places promised by the Government. That matter has been debated before, and was dealt with by one of the Minister's colleagues.

The figures that I gave do not take account of the number of places in nursery schools and classes, which went down slightly last year, apparently for the first time since 1992. Should the Ministers disagree with any of those statistics, I would be happy to give way or listen once they have further information. However, there is an important case to answer.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): We are used to many hon. Members abusing statistics, but the hon. Gentleman takes the biscuit. The expansion of child care places is about places for children. The hon. Gentleman referred to settings in which there will always be a variation. The number of places in playgroups, for example, always goes up and down—I shall return to that later. Using the overall statistics for 1998–99, which I have before me, I calculated that the number of places available to children increased by almost 12 per cent. Places for children count.

Mr. Clappison *rose—*

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) allow the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) to complete his response? When he does so, he may allow another intervention.

Mr. Clappison: I have been accused of abusing statistics and talking about settings rather than places, Sir Alan, but I was using the statistics prepared by the Under-Secretary's Department. The hon. Lady waves her paper. If she looks at the right-hand column, she will see that the statistics I have given are described as places. Places for day nurseries are up from 223,000 to 247,000—[*Interruption.*] Yes, the hon. Lady is with me. Places in playgroups are down from 383,800 to 347,200 and places—not settings—with child minders are down from 370,000 to 336,000. If one takes into account the places in day nurseries and day schools, which do not appear here—[*Interruption.*] I see that the hon. Lady nods. I do not want to labour this, but which of those statistics from her Department's press release is wrong?

Ms Hodge: I am sure that we do not want to spend the whole afternoon exchanging statistics. The hon. Gentleman has been selective. He has not referred to the expansion of places in out-of-school clubs or on holiday schemes. The massive expansion in nursery places for three and four-year-olds is not included in the statistics. Honestly, this is an abuse of the figures and it does not reflect the reality.

Mr. Clappison: That, Sir Alan—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but he has now thrice made the same small error. The form of address to the Chair in this place is Deputy Speaker; we are not in Committee.

Mr. Clappison: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Under-Secretary criticises me for presenting statistics in that form, but that is the form in which they appear in her Department's press release. It makes the distinction, which I made at the outset and which the hon. Lady would have heard had she been listening, between the provision for children aged under eight and that for those aged from five to seven. There has been an increase. The largest part of that increase is due to holiday schemes, which are rather different from the provision for children under eight—the sort of provision that the Minister for School Standards spoke about.

If the Under-Secretary adds up the figures in the way that the Government collect them, there is a reduction of about 45,000. I am trying to be fair as I am taking into account and making allowance for what the Government said earlier about this. The Member for

[Mr. Clappison]

Pontypridd, when he was an Education Minister, wrote to one of my colleagues to try to explain the reduction when it was first drawn to the Government's attention.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clappison: I will when I have completed this point.

What the then Minister said is completely different from what the Under-Secretary has said now. He did not quibble about the statistics, but sought to give an explanation. I am about to move on to that, so I think that the Minister was a bit early with her intervention. I shall give way to her hon. Friend unless she wants to hear my point first.

Caroline Flint: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government have contributed to a huge expansion in opportunities for parents to use child care in its many forms? In the unlikely event of there being a general election tomorrow and the Conservative party winning it, how many more places on top of the Government's already expanded services to parents would his party provide?

Mr. Clappison: The hon. Lady was a bit late with the first part of her intervention as I had anticipated that, and she was a bit early with the second. It is early in the political cycle to hear that point—*[Interruption.]* I can understand the hon. Lady not wanting to hear the statistics, but I shall give the explanation that was given by her colleague. An important point about the position of playgroups in all of this was completely omitted by the Minister for School Standards in her opening speech. The explanation given by her hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd when he was Education Minister was rather different. He conceded that there was a decline in the number of child-minding places, with a fall from 370,700 in 1998 to 337,000 in 1999. Incidentally, I hope that the Under-Secretary will now abandon her point about the statistics being bogus, as her colleague did not accept it.

He said that the decline in child-minding places was

"due to a number of factors. In particular we know that in the past lists of childminders maintained by local authorities have not always been up to date. The first ever audit of local childcare provision carried out by the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships has led local authorities to update their databases. This meant that some childminders who were still registered but had ceased to operate were removed from the register."

He added:

"This is good news for parents. They can now access accurate lists of local childminders which helps speed up the process of finding suitable childcare."

It is difficult for me to say at this point whether that explanation is right. I understand from Hertfordshire county council that its latest figures will show a continuing fall in the number of child minder places available, which would rather undermine the assertion that the child minding decline was a once-and-for-all phenomenon caused by an updating of the database. Even if we accept the Minister's explanation that the child minder places were all lost because of a revision of the register, there is still a reduction in the number of child care places in the last year for which figures are available, albeit a slight one. It certainly contrasts with the Prime Minister's assertion that 50,000 more places were being created over the same period.

That brings us to the important point about the position of playgroups and pre-school learning in that setting. That reduction is one of the most striking features of the whole picture of child care provision and those involved in child care will follow the debate with great interest. They will want to hear Ministers say a little more about playgroups, other than applauding them for the undoubted hard work that they do and have done in the context of partnerships. They will want to know more about what is going on in that sector. Ministers themselves accept that people in that sector are facing particular problems. I know that they accept that because they set up a review to study the sector, which recently published the report "Tomorrow's Children".

So that I am not accused of abusing statistics again, I shall quote what that report says about the change in the pattern of provision for playgroups and the period in which it has taken place. It says:

"The number of pre-schools/playgroups has fallen steadily in the 1990s: official figures show that the number peaked in 1991 when there were 18,000 sessional playgroups offering over 420,000 places. The number fell below 17,000 in 1995 and below 16,000 two years later. The most recent figures for 1998 show 15,700 playgroups offering 384,000 places."

That independent review also states:

"Our consultants concluded that the rate of closure is currently higher than in recent years although there were variations between regions."

That is worrying, because as the review acknowledges, not only are playgroups an important source of child care provision in this sector, but they bring wider benefits to families and communities. When playgroups and pre-schools close for reasons other than the quality of their provision, opportunities for community life, lifelong learning and family support may be lost. The parents of young children may no longer have the opportunities that the playgroups can provide to develop skills that may offer them their best chance of returning to work.

Mr. Willis: The hon. Gentleman should stop taking the milk of amnesia tablets. Does he agree that the figures that he has just quoted—I am glad that they are now on the record—are the most damning indictment of his Government's policy, particularly the introduction of nursery vouchers? Those vouchers drove more playgroups to the wall than any other policy. The setting up of a system under which ever more children went into reception classes at age four made it inevitable not only that playgroups would close but that the trend would be hard to dismantle, as the Government are discovering.

Mr. Clappison: The hon. Gentleman promised me that he would come to my assistance—well, it was pretty well-disguised assistance. Uncharacteristically, the hon. Gentleman, who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, came to the Government's assistance instead. His assertion about nursery vouchers flies in the face of the conclusions of the independent report

to which I referred, which stated that the problems of pre-school playgroups began much earlier—in the earlier 1990s, long before nursery vouchers were ever thought of, let alone introduced—and that the problems continue now, long after their abolition. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is familiar with the report, which goes into some detail about the factors responsible for the closure of pre-school playgroups.

Drawing upon the report once more, let me make another point that will be of interest to the hon. Gentleman because his constitutency covers some rural areas and is adjacent to others. Pre-school playgroups can play a particularly important role in rural communities. The report makes this point:

"In small rural communities which cannot support a school or nursery or where transport links are poor, a pre school or playgroup may be the only form of early years provision that is viable, and therefore can be an important contributor to the life of the community."

It follows that in these circumstances rural communities—once again—may be particularly hard hit if pre-school playgroups close.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point inasmuch as pre-school playgroups are vital to rural areas. Does he agree that demographic trends are part of the difficulty? These groups are closing because there are not sufficient children for them. That is why we must consider not only the quantity but the quality of provision. I hoped that we would get on to that, rather than stick on the statistics.

Mr. Clappison: I am coming to why the independent report thought that playgroups may be in difficulty. I know that the hon. Gentleman has an interest in rural areas, but I do not think that he paints the full picture. The report looked at the factors that may be causing the closure of pre-school playgroups, and noted:

"Many groups struggle under what is perceived to be an excessive administrative burden. This is reflected in the evidence collected by our consultants and was widely reported in response to our consultation."

Playgroups are saying that they face an excessive administrative burden. It is possible that recent policies and developments have increased the burden and the cost of regulation that playgroups face.

Much attention has been focused on the admissions policies of primary schools. The review states that they could have

"an enormous impact on local provision".

I note that, in their response to "Tomorrow's Children", the Government did not accept significant parts of the recommendations in their own report relating to admissions, which they said were a very important factor. Perhaps the Minister will say a little about that later. I know that the Government are trying to help, but whether they have done enough is another matter. The public sector would like to know how confident Ministers are that this decline in the number of pre-school playgroups will be arrested. The Government talk about the extra places that have been created, but if at the same time other places are being lost, this must be taken into account in evaluating claims and promises about creating extra places. We have to look at the whole picture. I want Ministers to say what they think the trend in pre-school playgroups will be, and whether they acknowledge both the special benefits of playgroups, in particular to rural areas, and—this is most important—the resulting loss of diversity in child care. Do they value the special benefits of these groups? Are they confident about the future of pre-school playgroups? We need to hear a little more than the Minister for School Standards said in her opening remarks.

We would appreciate hearing a little more about nursery classes in the maintained sector and about the ratio of learning assistants to teachers and the size of the nursery classes for which they are responsible. What has happened to them since the Government came to power? We hear much from Ministers about class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds, but rather less about classes for eight, nine and 10-year-olds and secondary school pupils. Nor do we hear much from them about the size of nursery classes. The latest figures from January this year show that more than one fifth of nursery classes taught by one teacher had more than 30 pupils. There has been a significant increase since 1997, when 18.5 per cent. of nursery classes had more than 30 children. This year, there has been an increase to 20.7 per cent., with classes of more than 36 children. I realise that other people besides teachers are involved in caring for nursery classes, but the Government must tell us a little about this and about the size of those classes. How easy do Ministers think it will be for teachers in nursery classes to maintain the close interest in children that is required? How will the Government set that against their objectives of early learning goals.

We want high-quality provision and educational achievement, but a balance must be struck because we are dealing with children of such a tender age. We must not make premature decisions that might put them off formal learning later. Ministers must acknowledge that, as well as the fact that learning through playing is important. We need to know more about how they think a balance should be struck.

I want Ministers to acknowledge the part played by parents who do not go to work, preferring to stay at home to look after their children. We share the objective of expanding high-class, high-quality provision, but it is important for the Government to examine the genuine concerns in the sector and look at the whole picture, rather then gloss over those concerns. We want a more balanced and objective view from the Government, with attention being paid to the problems, rather than letting them fester and merely telling us more about their promises and claims. A more balanced approach would deal with many concerns undoubtedly felt by people in this sector.

3.8 p.m

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Mr Deputy Speaker, this is the first opportunity that I have had to congratulate you on your well-deserved elevation to your new post.

It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), who is a kind, courteous and gentle member of the Government. [*Laughter.*] My apologies, that was a Freudian slip. My note said "the Minister".

[Mr. Phil Willis]

No doubt the hon. Gentleman would agree that many of us, especially those from the professonal or middle classes, have long taken early-years education for granted. When my first child was born in Cleveland over 20 years ago—a Labour authority which switched to the Conservatives, so I give both parties credit—there was a quality place for all five-year-olds for five mornings or five afternoons a week. That showed the authority's tremendous commitment. Our daughter went to an early-years class, which stood her in good stead. When we moved to Rufforth in North Yorkshire, where we now live, it was a small village and there was no equivalent provision. In fact, North Yokshire—starved of resources over many years—had a paucity of early-years provision. It was not expected that a small village school for only 34 children would have full nursery provision, but there was a playgroup. Parents clubbed together to provide a quality, professionally qualified, leader and our son had an excellent start there before he entered school.

At the time, I thought that that was the norm. I thought nothing more about it. It was not until I was working in east Leeds some years later that I began to recognise how vital early-years education was, particularly for youngsters in deprived urban settings—or, indeed, deprived settings anywhere. There was a lack of co-ordinated and quality provision in east Leeds. There was competition between the education day nurseries and the social service nurseries. Unqualified child minders offered much provision of dubious quality: there was some high-quality provision, but there was no control over standards. Overall, it smacked of everything epitomised by the previous Conservative Government. In other words, the system looked after a small handful of the wealthy, but the vast majority of young people had an unacceptably poor start in life.

The Rumbold report of 1990 dealt with the effectiveness of early-years education. It is a condemnation of the previous Government that they failed to build on that report and failed to recognise that the economic—as well as the social—well-being of the country depended on giving young people the best possible start.

The hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and I recently visited America. We attended a dinner to hear about a book, "The Nation at Risk", which was written for President Reagan and dealt with the health of the nation. We were both struck by it. It stressed that the country's economic future depended on possessing a high-quality, well-educated work force. It was not so much that a high-quality, well-educated work force was wanted in itself as that those would be the people to buy products when they were older. It was a hard-nosed approach to the problem. One piece of American research has become famous. Its conclusion was that one dollar invested before a child was seven repaid itself at least seven times over later on—an important statement.

The Liberal Democrats welcome much of what the Government have done and we compliment them on it. But we would say that, wouldn't we? Our "Foundations for Excellence" document, produced some time ago, highlighted many similar issues. It stated:

> "An education service designed to develop the potential of every child must begin with the early years. . . We are committed to developing a strategic framework. . . through Early Years Partnerships, initial and in-service education. . . We would encourage Early Years Development Partnerships. . . We would establish partnerships with parents from the beginning. We aim to ensure that high quality education is available. . . We would establish a Foundation Key Stage for children aged 3-5-plus at once. . . We would review initial teacher training for teachers intending to work in early years education".

When the Minister ably reviewed the Government's achievements, she was reading out a series of in effect Liberal Democrat objectives achieved by a Labour Government—constructive opposition at its very best.

We unreservedly recognise the commitment of the Minister and her colleagues and we should also recognise that they had an enormous mess to clear up. The Government took a bad idea—the nursery voucher scheme—and tried to make it better. Despite the protestations of the Tory Front-Bench spokesman, the reality is that throughout the country—even in Norfolk, where it was piloted—there was wholesale condemnation of that scheme. The hon. Member for Hertsmere cited rural areas, but I do not have a rural constitutency. Harrogate and Knaresborough is a purely urban constituency: would that I could represent more people, but I can deal with only one constituency at a time.

North Yorkshire provides a classic example of a large rural area, in which the nursery voucher scheme wrecked a whole range of provisions. It drove playgroups out of business and drove younger children into schools. The playgroups collapsed—that was the reality. I accept what the hon. Member for Hertsmere said about the value of playgroups. It takes me back to the playgroup in Rufforth—a place for parents to meet and for social groups to develop. People worked so well together. On millennium night, many of us intend to meet again after 20 years.

Instead of parents shopping around with their voucher, we now have an early-years development and child care partnership where parents can access provision without involving the shopping element. The key improvement is that partnerships have greater control over provision and can work within settings to improve quality.

In the Minister's opening remarks today, she failed to congratulate local education authorities—a slip, I am sure—for the enormous contribution that they made. It was not just the partnerships themselves, but the way in which LEAs worked hand-in-glove with them to ensure that they were successful.

Ms Morris: I accept that rebuke entirely and put that on the record. I apologise for missing local education authorities from the list. Of course they played a vital role in making the partnerships work. I am grateful to them.

Mr. Willis: I thought that I would give the Minister an opportunity to make that point before she retires to Cornwall.

The partnerships have also been important because they have included all the players in the field. These were not exclusive organisations, but an inclusive way of

getting people together. It was the first time ever, in my experience, that we had tried to bring different people together to form a partnership. In my county, it has been tremendous to see good ideas and practices cascade from one partnership to another.

The problem is that the money follows solely the child. We condemn the nursery voucher scheme, but an element of the same principle is being applied now—as the money still follows the child. That can cause difficulties in small settings. A group that is only just financially viable, with eight funded children bringing in £1,130 each, can only just manage. However, if one or two children leave, it suddenly becomes extremely difficult to cope. That is why so many pre-school playgroups are going out of business and why the Pre-School Learning Alliance is so concerned. It is not only a rural issue. The hon. Member for Hertsmere should be disabused of that. It is an urban issue too.

Mr. Clappison: I am sorry that I misdescribed the hon. Gentleman's constituency. However, I was not overlooking urban areas—only highlighting the special importance of pre-school playgroups where they exist in rural areas.

Mr. Willis: Obviously, I am grateful for that.

I should like to draw the Minister's attention to the fact that there are often pockets of deprivation in affluent urban areas. I will return to an issue affecting my own constituency later. In some playgroups, the opportunity to gain top-up fees in order to meet the requisite standards and bring in qualified staff simply does not exist. We are driving some good providers out of business, simply because present funding arrangements are not flexible enough for them to survive.

The evidence shows that more than 1,500 playgroups have closed and that a further 400 will close this year, which is devastating. During a recent education debate, the Government implied that, in essence, the question is one of parental choice. I hope that she did not mean that, because the matter is more serious than that. We must examine the underlying reasons, which is what the report to which the hon. Member for Hertsmere referred does.

Funding is certainly more generous than it was, but it will not allow for small provision, or for staff development and other support expenditure. I shall return to the issue of staff development, because I hope that the Minister has something positive to say about qualifications in early-years settings. It is true that, through the Pre-School Learning Alliance and partnerships, the Government have set aside some £750,000 to provide help for settings. That has been welcomed by organisations in my constituency, but the money is available for only a short time and in limited amounts. What will happen when it runs out? Will the Minister consider incorporating it in larger core funding for such groups? Without such funding, many provisions will close as soon as the money runs out. Does the Minister agree that it might be better to find a different funding method? If we want to encourage a quality setting, why cannot a particular setting be given a fixed resource for core funding, an amount for capital funding, and an additional amount for each young person who enters? Funding must not become a lottery. If we want to encourage quality early-years provision within the partnerships, there must be an incentive to invest in and maintain that provision. That applies equally to small settings and large urban settings.

I hope that the Minister accepts that placing four-year-olds in reception classes is problematic. Increasingly, LEAs and voluntary-aided schools are moving to a system of one-point entry. That can have serious implications for summer-born children, who may be placed in a reception class when they are just four years old. As the hon. Member for Hertsmere has said, in some cases, such children are placed in settings where there is only one teacher for 30 plus children. That cannot be right. We cannot allow regulations to state that early-years placement classes must have a ratio of one teacher to 15 children, but reception classes can have a ratio of one teacher to 30 children. The Minister, who has already commented on this issue, will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that experimental work is being undertaken in 40 LEAs, where reception class staffing ratios are being reduced to one teacher to 15 pupils. However, that is happening in only the most deprived areas. If the Minister accepts that we must have consistent, quality early-years provision, does she also agree that it must be extended to four-year-olds, whether they are in an early-years placement or a reception class?

We have made no bones about our disquiet at the placement of four-year-olds in reception classes. It is unrealistic for schools, particularly small primary schools, to recruit specialists in early-years education. Younger children often miss out on the extremely important elements of play and personal and social development that are to be gained from learning with older children. Many nursery schools and classes, and many private and voluntary settings, are populated largely by three-year-olds. It is well documented that, in terms of the learning process, it is important for three-year-olds to have contact with four-year-olds, and I am sure that the Minister supports that.

Despite the Government's claims, financial pressure on LEAs resulting from the nursery voucher scheme carry-over has not eased significantly. There is an incentive for LEAs to place as many young children as possible into reception classes. I know that that is not Government policy. The Minister and her predecessor made it clear that reception classes should leave places open, but no head teacher that I have ever met would leave places open and thereby forgo that budget, simply to satisfy what are Government hopes, rather than legislation or regulation. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

The issue of independent schools worries Liberal Democrats, and we are confused by the Government's response to it. With regard to registration under the Children Act 1989, we see no reason why independent schools should be treated differently from private and voluntary settings, but they are. The Minister has said that this is a complex and delicate issue, but we cannot understand why, because it appears to be simple. The Care Standards Bill, which is currently before the House, could regulate everything under one system. The hon. Member for Hertsmere may think that I am attacking the private sector, but I am not. Nor am I accusing the private sector and private schools of

[Mr. Willis]

necessarily doing a bad job. I am simply saying that everyone should do the same job, and the same regulations and standards should apply. The Private Day Nurseries Association is rightly angered that the matter has not been addressed, and we hope to table an appropriate amendment or new clause to the Care Standards Bill, although it would be far better if the Government did the job themselves.

Why do private day care providers and early-years providers have to pay the extra charge of business rates when LEA providers do not? I have written to the Secretary of State on the matter, and the Minister will doubtless be informed in due course. In high-rated areas—again, my constituency is a good example—that can prove a significant on-cost. There should be a level playing field in respect of business rates.

Liberal Democrats accept the need for inspection. Quality must continually be driven up in all educational establishments, but particularly in early-years settings. Section 10 inspections will continue to be applied to under-fives, and the Minister for School Standards has said that regulation will bring everything together. Does she mean that there will be regulation only for under-fives who are in non-school settings? We would welcome that, but why cannot regulation be extended to under-fives in school settings? According to Ofsted, its inspections are comparable to section 122 and ex-section 5 inspections of pre-school education provision, which is currently regulated under the Children Act 1989. As the Minister knows, that is manifestly incorrect: those forms of inspection are completely different. I hope that she can offer some comfort to early-years providers by saying that there will be a single framework, irrespective of where the four-year-old in question is placed. Will the Minister also confirm that, when the new branch of Ofsted is established, the person heading the new section will be an early-years specialist? It would arouse some suspicion if the new senior officer heading the early-years inspections were not a specialist in that field.

After-school clubs have been a success for the Government, and they are a significant achievement. As a direct result of the national child care strategy and the new opportunities fund, after-school clubs now encompass 3,100 providers and 114,000 places. The Liberal Democrats recognise that that is a terrific achievement. However, there is a potential problem in that the money so far allocated from the new opportunities fund is for start-up. Many providers in my constituency have asked what will happen when the start-up funds are finished. The answer is that the new working families tax credit will click into place, and that parents in receipt of that credit will simply transfer those funds into the after-school club provision.

There is a logic to that, and if one examines the costings on which the proposals were based, the model being presented balances out in the final analysis. However, we are not convinced that that will be the case. We know that, unless there is good publicity, simply presented, about how the scheme is to operate, it will not happen. With every other type of benefit arrangement, the way in which it is publicised makes a great difference.

The Department for Education and Employment is saying that it is the job of the early-years development and child care partnership to advertise that facility. That is unrealistic, because the partnership was never intended to do that kind of administrative and advertising work. That is a job for Government, and I hope that the Minister will mount a major campaign to get the working families tax credit into sync with the proposals for after-school clubs. Otherwise there will be the risk of a decline, and of the dissipation of the good work already carried out.

The Minister mentioned sure start, a project that the Liberal Democrats welcome. During a visit to North Carolina, my colleagues were most impressed by a similar project there, although I did not see the provision myself. [*Interruption.*] That project was called smart start, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) reminds me. I remember meeting my colleagues on the coach after their visit, and they were as excited as they would be if they had won the lottery. It was pretty impressive.

Every report that we receive about sure start is giving similar feedback. It is a very good initiative. I believe that it was initiated by the Treasury rather than the DFEE, but we will let that pass. The great advantage of the plan is that it is an integrated provision, and the Minister was right to say that it is a concrete example of joined-up government. It is the one project that Members of all political parties are calling a first-class initiative.

The trouble is that, in constituencies like mine, there is no access to the project. I have two deprived communities in my constituency—believe it or not, there is deprivation in Harrogate and Knaresborough. There are two major social housing estates in which there has been a real demand for sure start, yet on each occasion that we have asked the DFEE, we have been told that our social deprivation profile does not fit its criteria. We must encourage sure start in all areas in which there is a need for it and a willingness to participate in it. I hope that the Stockwell estate in Knaresborough—where excellent early-years provision is desperately striving to meet the social needs on the estate—and the Knaresborough road estate in Harrogate will be part of the initiative before long.

I could speak on this important issue for the whole three hours, but I shall conclude by saying that we are generally supportive of what the Government are trying to do. We have concerns in certain areas, but they are related to how to achieve the goal rather than to attacking the goal itself. However, the pledge to have 66 per cent. of three-year-olds in quality early-years places by the end of this Parliament is an unadventurous goal.

The Minister asked the hon. Member for Hertsmere what the Conservative party would do about this issue in its common-sense revolution, which is now under consultation, and he could not answer the question. The Liberal Democrats are committed, as we were at the last general election, to having quality early-years provision for all three and four-year-olds. It is nonsense to say that it is only good enough for some. If this is the Government's major education initiative—which we

support—and if the foundation of the education system depends on quality early-years education, it must be available for every single child.

We must not have the sort of social engineering that dictates that, in a county such as mine, where 2,000 extra places for three-year-olds are needed, there will be only 160 next year. That is unacceptable, and I hope that the Minister will fight tooth and nail with her Treasury colleagues to get those extra few pennies out of the Chancellor's war chest, so that she will be remembered as the Minister who provided quality early-years education for all three and four-year-olds.

3.37 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate. The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) questioned why it was taking place in this Chamber. I am thankful that we have this Chamber, as it has provided more time to debate the important issue of child care. Perhaps we would not have such opportunities if we were operating only in the main Chamber. I welcome this opportunity, and all those who have come here to take part.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of chairing a conference organised by the DFEE and the Daycare Trust that brought together people involved in establishing early-years development and child care partnerships up and down the country. It was fantastic, and I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister was there to address the conference and to answer questions. More than 500 people from all over the country were packed into the hall; in fact, people were turning up on the day even though they had not registered beforehand, and others were being turned away.

I do not wish to sound too corny, but the conference showed how the Labour Government are tackling the issue of child care. They recognise that while a national strategy is vital—a fact overlooked by the previous Government for many years—we rely on people in the community to establish the right mix of child care for the communities in which they live and work. That involves partnerships between local authorities, the voluntary and private sectors and, most of all, parents. It also involves listening to children to ascertain their needs, to ensure that the schemes are a success. The Government can be commended for a great deal in those areas.

It is a great pleasure to have a national child care strategy, and to have it discussed repeatedly by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. It would have been unheard of many years ago to hear the subject of child care debated by such eminent people. I have been involved for many years as chair of a national child care campaign, and it is nice that we have a Government who are listening.

I do not think that the Minister would deny that there are areas in which there is room to grow, or that we must examine how our provisions are working. We must build on the quality of provision, recruit the employees needed to service this expanding sector, and recognise the changing patterns of family life and the changing needs of parents. Undoubtedly, those changes affect different forms of child care. We must have a mature debate in advance of other provisions coming on-line that may affect the existing position.

For many years, Doncaster local authority, which is in my area, has had a good track record of providing nursery education in its schools—unlike several other areas that are under different political control. That has resulted in the provision of different services, which is partly the crux of the debate about pre-school playgroups. I am pleased that the council has sought partnerships with pre-school playgroups. I visited one such playgroup, which the local school had embraced in order to provide its nursery education by giving the group space within the school. That ensured that the quality of the provision was up to the standards that we would all expect for our children in their early years. That is an example of a successful partnership.

Another example is provided by Rossington high school, a secondary school in my constituency. It has assisted a pre-school playgroup in the village of Rossington by giving it space in a school building that was not being utilised. Consequently, parents were able to establish that group as part of our pre-school partnership in the Doncaster area.

Those are just two examples of local authorities and schools discussing matters, acting in partnership and bringing pre-school playgroups back into the fold. That contrasts with the separation that followed the previous Government's ridiculous introduction of the nursery vouchers scheme. From next year, education for three-year-olds will be rolled out to all local education authorities, and I know that that will be welcomed by parents throughout the land.

However, more work needs to be done to close the child care gap. More than two thirds of mothers now return to work after maternity leave, and the shortfall relates primarily to the under-fives. Last Friday, at the Rossington family centre, I met an adviser connected with the new deal for lone parents, who was conducting an outreach surgery to meet lone parents in the community. Although the centre will be providing me with some statistics, I think that it would also be useful for the Minister's Department to follow up the adviser's estimate that 50 per cent. of the lone parents who sought opportunities for work had children under the age of five. I was taken aback by the fact that people voluntarily sought work when they were in one of the most difficult periods for those raising children on their own. The Government should try to find out whether that is being reflected throughout the country by the Employment Service's outreach work and other positive policies for talking and listening to lone parents.

I should like to impress on the Minister the need to ensure that sure start strikes the right balance. There is a sure start pilot in my area. While it is important that the health service and other services in the community provide support for parents during the early years of their children's lives, it would be shortsighted—especially given the amount of money that is being provided for capital funds—to miss the opportunity to create the necessary infrastructure for child care, which is also important. Although that infrastructure may not be important for parents who want to go to work, parents who want to embark on education and training need an infrastructure that allows them to focus on that while their children are looked after in a quality environment. We should look to the future, when parents may want to go back to work or change jobs.

[Caroline Flint]

If we get the right infrastructure for child care now, it will develop and grow depending on the needs of parents—this year, next year and in 10 years' time.

When I and my colleagues on the Select Committee on Education and Employment went to America, we visited the smart start initiative in North Carolina. That initiative, which began in 1994, is led from the top by Governor Hunt—which demonstrates why it is so important that we have a Government who are prepared to lead from the top on child care issues. It was interesting that those involved in smart start appreciated that child care had to be an equal partner to the parental support that was being offered within communities.

Having helped to create two workplace nurseries, I have found that many people who are unused to working in child care, or whose children have not used any child care facilities such as a nursery, have somewhat blinkered imaginations in respect of the possibilities that exist. I should like to take a little time to describe a nursery in North Carolina that we had the good fortune to visit.

Having walked into the nursery building, which was quiet and pleasant, we went into a conference room to meet the manager of the nursery and some other people from smart start. Before our tour of the nursery establishment, I asked how many children attended it. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I nearly fell off my seat when I was told that they numbered 190. My colleagues could hardly believe it either.

The establishment was a combination of good design and advanced thinking about funding. The design featured a central core, where there were kitchens, office facilities, first aid facilities and meeting rooms for parents who might want to take part in parenting or literacy classes. Within that design had been created a series of small bungalows that housed no more than 10 children. That meant that while those children received a good quality of care and enjoyed a good staff to child ratio, the economies of scale allowed the nursery to thrive. Having helped, as I said, to establish two nurseries—one with 45 places and another with 30—I understand the economic difficulties of creating the diversity of funding that makes a success of nursery provision. That is one of the hardest things to get right.

The building was paid for by the YMCA, and smart start provided the quality assurance programme and the training of staff, as well as equipment, furnishings and outdoor play equipment. Governor Hunt's scheme subsidised families on low incomes—rather like our own working families tax credit and child care tax credit—and helped to bring money in. On top of that, the nursery, because of its size, had a partnership with the local university and other employers. We saw children from all ethnic backgrounds being brought together, all of whom were assured of quality provision. The diversity of funding assured sustainability into the future.

That subject arose during the conference organised by the Daycare Trust and the DFEE that took place a few weeks ago. It was suggested that we must ensure, through the partnerships, that there is an understanding about how to lever in money from the private sector and from those parents who can afford to pay part of the contribution, if not all of it. That is why it is important to work with the partnerships to ensure the involvement of people who understand business planning.

During our visit to America, my colleagues on the Select Committee and I were excited to see the dynamic partnership with the business sector. It helps to provide a good outcome and to obtain money to sustain projects in child care and in raising educational attainment. We must get away from the grant dependency in sustaining projects for the future. With sure start, capital is available for buildings, but we must look to the future. Denaby in my constituency has sure start, and many people who live there work in Rotherham, Barnsley or Sheffield. Professional parents may pay full fees for nursery places, but they support vulnerable parents in the community who may need to be subsidised.

The Select Committee closely studied students and child care. In our first report on further education, we raised a number of problems with access to child care. One in four colleges have no child care facilities and more than one third have no places for children under three. Student parents cannot claim the child care credit that is available to other parents. Many parents missed out on early education and deserve a second chance. I commend the Government for acknowledging that. Under the previous regime of the Further Education Funding Council, subsidies for child care were not available to students until the age of 19. That was ludicrous, as I said many times in the Select Committee and the House, and I am pleased that that changed in September.

There is a young parents centre in Doncaster for young girls who have become pregnant while at school. It allows them to continue their schooling and provides child care and support to enable them to do so. The previous situation was ridiculous. When they reached the school-leaving age of 16, they could not continue their education, even if they wanted to, because further education colleges could not secure funds for them because they were too young. I am pleased to put on the record today the fact that that has changed since September and that funding is available to those young parents for child care—with no age bar. That is to be commended.

We must consider how to expand the opportunities for students and encourage colleges to enter into partnerships with nursery provision in the wider community. I was told of a university in London that has a nursery, but with only a few places available to students and the remainder being taken up by staff. I do not want to become involved in a staff versus student argument, but a balance must be struck. One of the reasons why students could not access the provision was that the nursery wanted to offer full-time places or traditional part-time places. It was not flexible enough to cope with students' courses and study hours. Flexibility is vital to enable students' needs to be met, including vacation times.

The learning and skills councils offer an opportunity to ensure that their priorities include the provision of child care. Councils must liaise with early-years development and child care partnerships in the communities for which they have responsibility. It is important to stipulate that someone with child care expertise is given a voice on the skills councils.

Only one in 10 workplaces provide help with child care for staff. The Government are doing what they can to encourage employers to provide such care and they have the full support of the public—92 per cent. of parents say that the Government should do more to encourage employers—but we must consider new ways of enabling employers to take part in child care provision. I acknowledge that it is difficult for a single employer to build a nursery on site or to take full responsibility for establishing such a service. It is a specialised area and most employers do not have the resources for that provision, so we must try to broker partnerships to enable them to do so.

We must also consider incentives for employers. Perhaps we should have a kitemark for good employers who support family-friendly policies or, in these days of league tables, perhaps we should have a league table of bad employers who do not support family-friendly policies. I would not be averse to that, but it is better to reward the positive than to emphasise the negative. We could consider the financial restrictions on employers who support their staff. For many years—too many years—I was involved with the campaign against the workplace nursery tax, which was eventually rescinded, because it did not acknowledge that child care is fundamental. I am pleased that there has been some movement in the Treasury towards supporting employers who help to subsidise public transport for their staff, and I hope that child care will be treated similarly. It is important to move away from benefits that stifle the opportunity to consider imaginative schemes for child care.

I have referred to business partnerships. I am aware that some businesses are interested in providing money on a business loan basis to those who want to establish child care provision and to provide back-up by helping child care providers to establish suitable business plans to make their enterprises sustainable. More work could be done on that.

We must remember that local authorities and hospitals are the largest employers in local communities. We should ensure that child care is part of their corporate staff policy. It is ironic that local authorities are playing such an important role in the early-years development and child care partnerships, but they may be found lacking in the provision of child care for their own staff. I am sure that the Minister is keeping a close eye on the ball to ensure that the money that is provided for child care in the community is passed on in full and that its resourcing and development is receiving full attention.

I shall comment briefly on the House of Commons. Hon. Members will be aware that in 1998 a child care survey was made of hon. Members, their staff and staff in the House. Since then, little has been said or done. Almost 300 of those who responded to the survey said that they would probably use a nursery if it were available. A large number said that they would support holiday play schemes. At a time when new buildings are being erected and accommodation is being reorganised in the Palace of Westminster, it is difficult to understand why there has not been time to discuss child care provision in the House. I have three children, but they are all at school, so I am not seeking a personal benefit. I realise that, with the hours that Members of Parliament work, it would be difficult to provide child care for everyone, although it should be possible to make provision for some hon. Members and their families. More important, although the Palace of Westminster is a major employer, many staff do not have access to appropriate facilities. Not so long ago, I was privileged to visit nursery providers in the Westminster area. Several nurseries were run by the Church of England Children's Society, and I found, to my amazement, that in Whitehall the child care needs of staff are not typically disregarded. Many Departments, including the Ministry of Defence, subsidise or buy places for its staff in nurseries in the Westminster area. I have written to my hon. Friend the Minister about this matter.

As we move into the next millennium, perhaps we should reconsider the Administration Committee's decision that a nursery could not be provided without resort to subsidy and, therefore, to the taxpayer. If time can be found in the House—I believe that 30 minutes was spent discussing whether vellum should be used in the House of Commons—we should debate this matter. A nursery could be provided in the Palace or we could go into partnership with other child care providers in the vicinity and allow staff to adopt that option. I realise that that is not directly the responsibility of my hon. Friend the Minister. However, the Government's national child care strategy is designed to persuade employers and local authorities to provide child care and to support providers in the private and voluntary sectors. It is a shame that we cannot get it right in the Palace of Westminster.

4.1 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): It is a pleasure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that my inaugural foray in this Chamber is taking place under your chairmanship. We struggled long and hard to get this experiment under way and, for good or bad, it is in place. I hope that many hon. Members will appreciate the benefits that this Chamber offers. I hope to play a small part in that regard this afternoon.

I am also pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond to the debate. She came to Gloucestershire earlier this year to talk to the early-years partnership. I must put on the record my thanks to her for that useful visit. I know that she has spoken to similar groups and that she has regular debates with people about what the Government are doing and how we could further enhance facilities.

I have no particular expertise in this area. I cannot match the knowledge of my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), who sits on the Education and Employment Committee and whose previous experiences were relevant. I have some knowledge of the matter—I have talked with groups in my constituency.

I should declare an interest—my wife is the treasurer of the Stonehouse after-school group. She puts many hours into that work, which is unpaid, and I pay tribute to her for it.

Over the past two and half years, I have visited the various facilities that are available in my constituency and talked to many groups and constituents, who visited me in my surgery to discuss child care issues. I want to weave three questions into my speech, which I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will answer. In case they become lost somewhere in the midst of other points that I raise, I shall finish my speech by repeating them.

[Mr. David Drew]

I concur with many of the points that were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley. She said that, although we should examine and evaluate the situation, we should also stress how well the Government are doing in this context.

The Government issued a clear manifesto commitment on child care. It is initially being delivered for four-year-olds, but it will in due course be delivered for three-year-olds. Such provision affects whether people can work and secure an appropriate quality of life for their children. The richness that our different communities provide depends on adequate child care provision.

Although the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) threw a lot of statistics at us, I have some sympathy with his comments. I was not trying to be unhelpful when I said that we need to consider demographics as well as the way in which different groups function. His argument was important and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond to it.

The Government's approach involves quality and choice and it should provide places for people where they most need them. That does not involve a numbers game; it means guaranteeing individuals' children access to appropriate provision. We shall not be able to meet our ambitious target in two and a half years, but we have made an important start.

The structure of provision is confusing and sometimes daunting. I know from my county and constituency experience that although there are complementary approaches, there is also conflict between different providers. I do not want competition to outwit what I regard as the better approach, which involves people working together. However, we must face up to the fact that people choose between different organisations, which may mean that there will always be some conflict. Some organisations will go out of business, but others will replace them. We must give appropriate support to providers and ensure that the superstructure that surrounds these organisations is as effective as it can be.

I give credit to my county of Gloucestershire, which was not, but which was almost, unique—that may be a contradiction in terms—in that at the outset there was no formal provision of nursery education. It would be easy to play party politics and to say who was responsible for that. Since then, pre-school education has been provided slightly differently. The argument at the time was that, in the main, people in Gloucestershire did not want such provision or did not need it because there were other ways in which their children's needs could be catered for. That argument is, and has been proved to be, bunkum. Our experience is that many types of pre-school provision, including breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, and holiday provision, are popular. Long may they continue to be so. We must knock on the head the idea that good provision was already available and that many people made use of it—that was clearly not the case. Appropriate provision was not available and people could not always pay for what was available. We have begun to develop an effective strategy in the county and nationally.

I had some criticisms of the early-years development plan that my authority put together, but working with the public, private and voluntary sectors brought together the best elements. Those sectors learned from each other, and we have tried to encourage that approach. The Government are not trying to prescribe what should happen in each area. Admittedly, we have to provide funding—without it, many positive developments would not have occurred. However, our approach does not involve choice for its own sake; we are trying to find a different way to do things and to bring people together in ways that were not previously possible.

Our approach does not simply involve education authorities. I am pleased by the way in which education authorities work with social services departments and local authorities work with health authorities. Those bodies can look across the cultures—there are often different cultures in this context—and begin to work together to mould policies so that they dovetail and do not have contradictory results. We should appreciate that different bodies may approach the problem from different directions.

My area has not yet had the benefit of sure start, although that money will, I hope, come through in due course. However, we do receive home start, albeit in a slightly different way—that is always the way with Gloucestershire. We tend to do our own thing, which is a strength and—dare I say it—a weakness.

We have begun to see how the link with parent education—especially the parent network organisation in Gloucestershire, with which I have had dealings—can help parents deal with the problems of their adolescent children. That is an important development, and is closely linked to the family centre, which is one of the good things to come out of Gloucestershire. In many respects, such centres were created for the wrong reasons—a lack of nursery provision—but have now been turned into a notable success. The creation of the centres was slipped through without being noticed by a particular party, but I should not emphasise that point too much. They offer pre-school provision for parents who have not been able to get their children into a playgroup or nursery, and they also provide support for parents, especially in the more deprived parts of my constituency. The Park family centre in Stonehouse, where I live, and the Parliament family centre in Stroud have done a lot of good work in supporting parents and, more important, their children. That is worth advertising, and I hope that it is in line with what the Government want.

I do not intend to criticise the Government, but I want to focus on some problems that have been brought to my attention. I have some sympathy with what the hon. Member for Hertsmere said about provision, but it is inevitable that such a change would have such consequences. Recruiting good-quality people for playgroups and after-school clubs is a problem. Rural areas might be different, but there is not an abundant supply of people with the right qualifications and aptitude. The right people may come forward in due course, but there is a genuine need for training. Some visitors to my surgery have been unclear about what qualifications they would need to get those good-quality jobs, so clarification is necessary. Perhaps that message could be relayed through the early-years partnership.

Pressure on volunteers is also a problem, as the hon. Member for Hertsmere pointed out in relation to rural areas. If people have to sacrifice a lot of time, that is

undesirable. Everyone wants to drive up standards, including the groups themselves. They are not saying, "We want to stay as we are." Instead, they welcome increasing professionalisation, and want help to achieve what we are asking of them. That relates to the question of how to get volunteers and what to expect of them. Volunteers are being asked to do a professional job—we should not kid ourselves about that—and they are prepared to do it, but they need support.

Another important issue is children with special needs. Dursley Church of England primary school has a centre, at the Highfields site, which has done excellent work for children who otherwise would not have such opportunities. The Shrubberies special school, in Stonehouse, also takes children with profound difficulties, and provides them with a more gentle and supportive introduction to education. As always, there are more children with such needs than available places. How will special needs be catered for? That is an especially pertinent point in Gloucestershire, as a special needs review is currently under way. Considerable opposition has been expressed, largely to the proposed closure of moderate learning difficulty schools. All that washes back into pre-school provision, and further strategic thinking is probably necessary. Resources will have to be applied—nationally, locally or a balance of the two.

The Government have made an enormous financial commitment—£470 million. No group has come to me to say, "Please, you're doing the wrong thing." There may be nuances and differences of opinion on certain issues, but the groups welcome the investment of time and money in the sector, and will do what they can to make provision available. The link with schools was touched on my the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), who spoke about the stage at which children should enter schools. In a mostly rural area such as mine, that is a planning issue. A private nursery in my constituency, Upper Knapp Farm day nursery, made the point that although it benefits, through the child care tax credit, from the money that it puts into the system, it needs to know how to plan for the future. Schools might open pre-school units in competition with such nurseries, and there will also be other developments. Clarity is, therefore, necessary.

The breadth of support and quality of after-school provision are impressive. I have direct experience of that in Stonehouse, and I have also been to Gastrells in Stroud. Children are now recieving genuine support where previously they received none. Many of those children are receiving that support because their parents are able to go out to work, which is a win-win situation. Some of those children might have gone to child minders previously, but most of them probably did not. Provision is therefore being opened up. Finance, development and resources are important.

There are three main questions for my hon. Friend the Minister. First, what training and support are necessary to recruit good people, and what should the qualification route be? I am confused about that, as are people who have visited my surgery. Secondly, what will be done about the funding gap up to Christmas, which is a result of the way in which the money is paid? That is an issue for the nursery that I visited, and also for the playgroups, which are saying, "We are fine from Christmas onwards, but how do we get to Christmas, because the money isn't there?" I have read the answers to parlimentary questions, and perhaps I have got the wrong message, but strong opinions have been expressed on this matter.

The third point relates to funding, and touches on something that I have already emphasised. Child care tax credits are very welcome. I know that the Minister does not have direct responsibility for them and I do not want to put her on the spot, but why do people receive child care tax credits when they send their children to a child minder but not when they use a nanny, who may work from someone else's home? I do not want to finish on a negative note, but that is causing one of my constituents a great deal of angst. She keeps asking for an answer and I try to explain why the problem has not been addressed. Such minor considerations can make a difference between someone sending their child to an appropriate place and getting to work, and not. My constituent works and child care tax credits would help her in many ways. I realise that the Minister may not be able to respond now, but a commitment to write to me would be appreciated.

As an overview, apart fiom my minor quibbles, the policy achievement has been tremendous. We are delivering, and a lot of good developments have taken place.

4.21 pm

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): I came this afternoon to celebrate the Govemment's achievements in extending quantity and quaiity of nursery and child care provision, but I realised that there would be time for me to make a contribution.

I want to highlight the importance of training and qualifications, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards. In Bristol, although not in my constituency, I can celebrate our early-years and child care partnership which has brought together the private sector, the voluntary sector and the local authorities to make even better provision than they were making separately. I can also celebrate an important development—again not in my constituency—with sure start.

Those excellent projects build on provision that the city of Bristol and formerly the county of Avon made many years ago to ensure that all four-year-olds had the opportunity of nursery education. That is in sharp contrast with Gloucestershire, which is the neighbouring county of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). They built on a tradition that went back to the provision of traning. After the war, it was recognised that child care was important and that women, who were the man providers of child care, needed qualifications. The city and county of Bristol, as it then was, established a nursery nurses college. In 1946, women entered the college and gained what became the Nursery Nurses Education Board qualifications. The college, of which I had the privilege of being not just a governor but chair of the governing body, continued as a local education authority college until the incorporation of further education colleges. I saw the basic qualification for 16 to 19-year-olds develop, in conjunction with further and higher education in the city, to become diploma qualifications that led on to graduate and post-graduate qualifications. Those

[Valerie Davey]

developments in qualifications have been of prime importance. I trust that they can be developed throughout the country.

I know high-quality provision is important. My hon. Friend the Minister emphasised the fact that people from a range of backgrounds enter child care. In her climbing frame example, there is not just one step ladder but several step ladders for different backgrounds and skills, such as nursing and teaching, which contribute to a nursery qualification. That can lead to a teaching qualification and beyond.

I want to celebrate those achievements because the Government are determined that provision is not localised and dependent on where people live. They want provision to be available generally and the qualifications recognised nationally. People should have a clearer understanding of what elements of professional training contribute to the qualifications. This is not just about child care. As a governor of the college, I recognised many years ago that the young people who were providing child care were also confronted with the needs of the parents. The children that they cared for often came from disturbed homes and needed carers who understood them and the family setting, because the parents also needed support. It was soon recognised that those who entered the profession at a more mature age were often better qualified. They brought with them experiences that were relevant to their professional work and training and were able to become highly skilled providers of care for children and their families.

I remind hon. Members of a trip that the Select Committee on Education and Employment made to Switzerland. We saw excellent nursery provision that was highly structured but most creative in every sense of the word. It catered for young people of a slightly older age group than we associate with nursery education, which raised the issue of the age at which young people should transfer from nursery provision to the more formal early reception year before infant education.

There is a provision, which is based in Bristol, that is a national resource. It is known as "Children of the 90s", which has the difficult acronym ALSPAC—the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. The aim of the group is to identify ways in which to improve the health and development of future generations. It started in 1990 and, in association with the university, studied the development of all children born in Avon—which has a population of about 1 million—during 1991 and 1992. More than 14,000 children were included in the study. It included a hands-on examination of the children, questionnaires that were completed by parents, education, social and health records, biological samples and specific measurements of the home environment to determine the causes of childhood ailments and disorders. It also looked positively at the way in which children develop.

All training must include an excellent child development study. At an all-party group on the adoption of children, I recently met social workers who were examining the complex way in which children develop within adoptive homes to determine their needs. They thought that it was important for social work training to emphasise child development. I recommend the studies that were produced by "Children of the 90s". It has provided a huge bank of knowledge and should be seen as a national resource. In 1998 those children reached seven and an extenive study is under way. There is a resource which can be the basis of a great deal of potential study in colleges and universities and which will, I am sure, supplement the training that is being given at all levels.

In Bristol we celebrate the fact that our association has existed over many years, emphasising the importance of child care and development. We have particularly emphasised training and professional qualifications and the bringing together of social services, education and health resources to ensure a greater understanding of children's development and needs.

In Bristol, as in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, we have home start, which has shown how, in the voluntary sector, people with their own experience in the family can contribute. It invited to its last AGM the director of "Children of the 90s", recognising that those volunteers, too, need professional help and development. That is all, of course, for the children. I believe that, although such work is intended to improve the health and development of children of the next generation, the Government have made an excellent start in their first two and a half years towards ensuring excellent nursery provision for children now, which will stand them in good stead in the future. I trust that for the rest of the Government's term—and the following five years—there will be the necessary long-term development to ensure that the importance of child care and professional training for those involved in it is recognised in our communities and as part of our national heritage.

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): I am delighted to participate in my first debate in this Chamber, especially with you in the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I join other hon. Members in congratulating you on becoming a Deputy Speaker.

This has been a vigorous and thoughtful debate and, I hope—to revert to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint)—the beginning of a mature debate on some of the issues that we confront as we develop early-years education and child care services.

One reason for my delight at participating in this debate is that this is my first opportunity in a debate to think about and respond to some of the issues that hon. Members raise. Normally, when we debate in the other Chamber, we are up against time constraints, and I always feel that Front Benchers do not give enough time to the issues raised by hon. Members during debates. I shall start by doing that, and then return to an overview, building on what my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards said.

The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) was, I think, playing with statistics, because our purpose is not to become obsessed with the settings in which children are placed. In whatever setting, we want them to have a good experience, with sufficient opportunities to provide choice for parents and children. The quality of the experience and the nature of the choice are what

matters—not so much the setting. That was why I wanted to draw attention to the overall increase that has taken place in child care and early-education places. That is an indisputable fact, although the places are emerging in varied settings as we create greater diversity in the system.

Mr. Clappison: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. As I made clear, I was talking about places rather than settings. Her party has made pledges that have concentrated on numbers. Perhaps the Minister would write to me setting out how provision for children under eight has, as she claims, increased. I should be happy to receive such a letter, because her Department's statistics—taking the whole picture and all the settings involved—show a reduction in the number of places.

Ms Hodge: I will gladly write to the hon. Gentleman, but would simply comment that he has selected part of the relevant figures. Children under eight also take advantage of out-of-school clubs and holiday schemes. The figures to which the hon. Gentleman referred do not reflect the massive increase in early-years education, in maintained schools and other sectors.

Certain evidence from the figures causes me concern, as it will the hon. Gentleman, and he may want to respond. There was a drop in one year in the number of child minders, which is worrying in the light of our wish for diversity and for the type of response to the growing gap in child care, particularly for the under-fives, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley alluded. We need to deal with that and are doing so. There are many reasons for that decline in the last year. They include the fact that we are cleaning up the figures. For the first time, we have had proper audits, which revealed that social services lists included child minders who had not been working for many years. In a tight labour market, people tend to move out of jobs that have traditionally been seen as low-income, low-status jobs, and child minding is viewed in that way. We need to do something about that and to raise the status and income that people can enjoy from it.

A welcome discovery has been made by the Exit survey carried out by the National Childminding Association. Many women who enter child minding—98 per cent. of people working in early-years education and child care are women—are going up the climbing frame of qualifications into other professions, such as social work, health work or teaching. We should welcome that, not merely because of the greater contribution to society that those people subsequently make, but because of the personal development of those women. Nevertheless, we need to tackle the need for sufficient places to meet the child care gap for working parents.

Mr. Clappison: I was concerned about playgroups. When the Minister writes to me, will she set out her reply in the form in which her Department publishes the statistics—the provision for children under eight? Is she saying that there has been an increase in that provision, setting aside the provision for out-of-school clubs and holiday schemes, which I distinguished from other provision and which is mentioned in the documents? That provision has decreased.

Ms Hodge: With the greatest respect, I must say that that comment shows that the hon. Gentleman does not live in the real world, where children across the spectrum are spending part of their time in school, using the growing services that are now available for three and four-year-olds in school; they may then have wrap-around care, of which out-of-school clubs are inevitably part. The document, which I happen to have with me, refers to provision for children aged five to seven. We are getting into a ridiculous argument about definitions rather than about substance—about whether there is more or less provision for children. We recognise that there is not enough, which is why we have embarked on a national child care strategy and the expansion of early-years education. However, we are getting there, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Member for Hertsmere, and the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) mentioned another matter; the latter happens to have absented himself, so I shall not respond to his entire lengthy contribution. While he got cold, we remained cold in this Chamber.

Mr. Clappison *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Is it about the cold?

Mr. Clappison: No, it is not about the cold. I do not want to come to the assistance of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough and I do not agree with all that he said, but I should be interested to hear the Minister's response to it.

Ms Hodge: Perhaps I should write to him as well.

Because of our concern to retain and maintain a vibrant and growing pre-school sector, we established the pre-school review. It was not our review; we put in place an independent review chaired by an independent chairman so that its conclusions would not be Government conclusions but could be considered by us. We are already doing so. We have published an early response to the many recommendations in that review. Together with partners such as the pre-school sector and the early-years development and child care partnerships, we are developing a plan for the early-years and child care sector to ensure that as that sector grows, the pre-schools play a strong role because we want diversity.

I want to set one record straight. Under this Government, pre-schools have unprecedented access to public funds. That did not exist prior to our taking office. They have the money that follows the child, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said, with the expansion of free places for three and four-year-olds. Of the first tranche of money for the expansion for three-year-olds, 80 per cent. has gone into the private and voluntary sectors. Most of that money is going to help to sustain a vibrant pre-school sector. That is crucial to the child care tax credit—a mechanism that will bring more resources into the sector.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, asked how we would publicise the child care tax credit. I stress that we are not leaving it to partnerships, although they have a key role because they are in direct contact with providers, who in turn are in direct contact with those

[Ms Hodge]

parents who need to make claims. We are supporting those partnerships. We have given them a disk of information that will help to explain what is available locally. The Daycare Trust will be grant-aided to go round the country with an information campaign on child care tax credit and I am in discussions with the Treasury to ensure that its advertising also reaches parents.

In the first 63 days since the introduction of the working families tax credit, there were more than 700,000 inquiries. We have now had 430,000 new and renewal applications. We are not doing a bad job to ensure that a new tax credit, which brings money into the system, especially the pre-school system, reaches the appropriate people.

For two years running, we have made a £500,000 grant, which is administered by the pre-schools themselves, to ensure that those in financial difficulty have access to short-term funds to sustain themselves. We give a large amount of money to the Pre-School Learning Alliance central budget to support pre-schools in the field—more than £1.5 million towards training. A lot of money is going into the sector.

Other issues, such as the admissions policy, need to be addressed. I say to those hon. Members who believe in local democracy that we will not and should not dictate from the centre about what local people and local education authorities should do about their admissions policy. The guidance encourages deferred entry. We are pleased that more local education authorities are taking up deferred entry, but it would be wrong for us to dictate that those authorities should ignore local parental choice and take a particular route on the matter of entry.

The hon. Members for Hertsmere and for Harrogate and Knaresborough raised the issue of class sizes. There is a distinction, which I am not sure that the hon. Member for Hertsmere entirely understands, between nursery and reception class sizes. Nursery class sizes have not gone up. Between January 1998 and January 1999, the average size of single-teacher nursery classes decreased. An additional adult tends to work alongside the nursery teacher in such classes. In the guidance drawn up under the Children Act 1989, we recommend that there should be two adults in every nursery class. We inherited the mess caused by nursery vouchers, to which the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough referred. Competition for the vouchers led to far too many children going to inappropriate reception classes.

Mr. Clappison: The hon. Lady may not have heard me correctly. I referred to nursery class sizes. Once again, I am quoting from the Government's own published information, which shows that between 1997 and 1999 average class sizes went up, and so did the percentage of classes with 31 or more pupils. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough made that point, too.

Ms Hodge: There is a distinction between nursery classes, to which I think that the hon. Member for Hertsmere referred, and reception classes, to which I know that the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough was referring. We were not quite in government in January 1997—I know that it seems a long time since we took office as we come up to Christmas and we are all getting tired. The 1997 statistics were around when the Conservative party was in power. I was referring to statistics for January 1998–99, which are more relevant, as they have been compiled since we came to power.

Mr. Willis: May I offer you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Minister an apology? I had a pager message that my flat was flooded. My daughter said, "We can't turn the water off." I was responding to a damsel in distress. I know that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would have rushed from your place if you had had a similar message.

The Minister acknowledged my point and I hope that she will expand on her answer. A significant number of very young four-year-olds are now in reception classes. The Minister acknowledged that by giving 40 local education authorities additional funding to reduce those class sizes to no more than 15. Does the hon. Lady therefore agree that, having made that concession, the provision should be applied to all reception classes so that all four-year-olds, especially young four-year-olds, receive proper early-years provision rather than extended reception provision?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough for explaining why he was late returning to hear the ministerial reply. That is an example of courtesy which not only the Minister but hon. Members very much appreciate.

Ms Hodge: Thank you, for making remarks with which I should like to associate myself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, particularly given my previous comments before the hon. Gentleman explained his absence. I draw to his attention the fact that we have so far helped 60 LEAs, not 40. I entirely agree that what matters now is to get absolutely right the offer that four-year-olds enjoy. Part of it relates to the adult-child ratio in those settings. We have made a start and I cannot pre-judge the Chancellor's future decisions about extending the provision across the country, but it is of great importance if we are to provide the quality education that we want.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough mentioned independent schools. I draw his attention to a clause in the Care Standards Bill that will give powers to the Secretary of State to introduce regulations to regulate and inspect the provision for children under five in independent schools. We are consulting the independent sector about that. I draw hon. Members attention to a serious problem with a number of independent schools in which perhaps half a dozen children are of statutory school age, but many more are below it. The fact that they have a few children of statutory school age exempts them from the regulation and inspection regime. I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about that. We are consulting on it with the independent sector.

Business rates for private providers is a difficult issue. Rates are set according to market value. The market value of a school is far less than the market value of what might often have been domestic properties before they became private nurseries—that leads to a difference in rateable values. The issue has already been drawn to my attention and I am considering whether there is anything that we can do about it.

I commend the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley has done on child care issues. I hope that together we can sort out something for the Palace of Westminster—we ought to lead by example here at the heart of the nation if we are serious about evolving a national child care strategy. I agree with my hon. Friend's comments on the conference that we recently attended. Eighteen months into the national child care strategy, it was heartening to see more than 500 people, from the north of Scotland down to Cornwall—in respect of which my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards is currently carrying out her ministerial duties—talking about child care. Some 200 people could not get in because the hall was full.

I have also visited many partnerships, including those in Gloucester and Bristol. My visits are often on a Saturday and it is encouraging to see as many as 150 people from various local places, with different experiences, backgrounds and interests, thinking about the local provision of early-years education and child care. We are encouraging the growth of something innovative and important.

I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley on the issue of students and child care. I trust that she, too, welcomes the money that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made available in his pre-Budget review. I hope that we will be able to use that to support individual students, rather than more provision in further education colleges. By supporting individual students, we will deal with the problem of those colleges that choose not to invest in a child care facility on site.

I am pleased that, as part of the national child care strategy, we have been able to put in £5 million annually through the Further Education Funding Council to encourage FE colleges to develop their facilities. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley on the importance of learning and skills councils. We must ensure that they put a strong emphasis on training for early-years education and child care workers.

I also agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of local authorities using the money that we give them in their standard spending assessment for early-years provision. It was depressing to find out last year that only 20 per cent. of that money had been passported through to the early-years development and child care partnerships, reflecting the priority that many local authorities give to this important work—it is important in the community, but it is not always quite as important in council chambers. We will do all that we can to urge that more happens in that regard.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) asked more than three questions. Perhaps I can combine one of my answers with a response to the thoughtful contribution of the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey). If we are to succeed, it is crucial to attract, retain and train good child care workers and thus raise quality in that sector.

It is astonishing that more people work in early-years education and child care than there are teachers. If we are to meet the demands of our current targets, we need to recruit a further 100,000 people into the sector. The work is traditionally low paid and the work force comprises 98 per cent. women and is 97 per cent. white. Although there are many talented, committed, well-qualified and competent workers, there are also too many who do not have appropriate training and qualifications. That is why we are investing a huge amount in a qualification and training framework. We have done a lot already. We have set up a new national training organisation and we are establishing a new qualifications framework.

We inherited a legacy of between 1,300 and 1,400 different qualifications—employers did not know what competencies they were buying and students did not know what competencies they would obtain from the training that they were doing. We are establishing a new national framework of nationally recognised qualifications. We are prioritising training and investing money in it via the further education sector, training and enterprise councils and the standards fund. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West said, it is important that there is an emphasis on child development.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud talked about children with special educational needs. Again, some authorities and establishments are doing really good work with those children, but there is more to do. The Department recognises that if we can identify children's needs and give the appropriate support early on, the outcome for those children will be enormously enhanced. That is why this year, for the first time, we have ring-fenced some of the money given to the early-years development and child care partnerships for investment in special educational needs. I hope that that is the start of a much longer-term strategy to tackle that issue.

My hon. Friend also mentioned child care tax credits for nannies. Where the state puts money into child care, it is important that there is a quality threshold, which is why tax credits are available only when that child care is regulated and registered. Nannies are neither regulated nor registered and, as I have explained elsewhere, to provide regulation for nannies would be an almost impossible task and would give false comfort to parents who were selecting them for their children. That is why nannies are not included in the scheme. I note, however, that the child care tax credit has been generous.

I hope that I have answered the questions that were asked. I shall conclude by saying something about the overall strategy. When we came into government, the needs of young children and their families in the changing world of work were simply not emphasised. One difference between this Government and the previous Government was the latter's belief that the interests of children and families were a matter of private concern for individuals. The state intervened only at points of crisis—when a child was at risk of abuse, for example. There was a lot of rhetoric abusing lone parents and much moralising about the nature of the family, but there was not a lot of support for families and children. I hope that we are beginning to put into place an infrastructure that will give young children the best start and will support families in the changing world of work, especially given that more mothers are working.

When we came into government, the United Kingdom lay at the bottom of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's international league tables for investment in early-years education. However, OECD colleagues made a recent visit to undertake a study of this issue and there is no

[Ms Hodge]

doubt that we are now leading OECD countries in both innovation and investment. Some £8 billion is being invested in this comprehensive spending review period—I call it our quiet revolution. We are expanding places, developing a quality framework, reviewing regulation and inspection, investing in training and introducing a new foundation stage with early-learning goals. All those are key initiatives.

The other initiatives to which hon. Members referred, such as, sure start and early excellence centres, are prime examples of how the Government are trying to break down traditional professional barriers. We are trying to work not merely across Government, but across sectors and professions to put children at the centre of everything that we do and to meet their needs. We want professionals to respond to children's and families' needs, rather than to their own needs.

This is the most exciting time to be working in early-years and child care. We have already achieved a huge amount. All four-year-olds have a place and the number of three-year-olds in places has doubled. We will set a target during this Parliament for universal nursery education for three-year-olds. We will deliver child care places for 1 million children by the end of this Parliament. We will have 250,000 sure start centres up and running. We will exceed our target on early excellence and we will have a new framework of qualifications and regulations.

There is a huge amount left to do and I want to end with a big thank you, not to people in the House, but to the many hundreds of people in local communities who have engaged with us so positively, despite the huge pressure that we have put on them to start delivering the best start for our young children. We can decide national policies here, but they must be delivered locally in communities. We depend on local people. We share with them the agenda of creating a more equal society to ensure that all children enjoy the opportunity to develop their potential from their earliest years. That is a vital policy and we are beginning to deliver on it.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 December 1999

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Permanent Health Insurance

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): This is the first time that I have had the opportunity to speak in the new surroundings of Westminster Hall. I welcome the fact that I can lay papers in front of me and take a drink during a speech. I hope that holding the debate in this Chamber will not detract from the argument of those suffering at the hands and sharp practices of some permanent health insurers.

My purpose is to highlight the problems of some people who have contracted chronic illnesses and subsequently found that their insurance policies, which should have covered them for loss of income, have not been honoured. According to the 1996 Office of Fair Trading report, permanent health insurance is an insurance policy to replace people's income should they become unable to do the job for which they are insured. Policies usually cover up to 75 per cent. of an individual's salary until the time that the individual loses employment, but payments are less any state benefits to which he or she is entitled. They do not cover any payments for disability.

When people are unable to continue work due to chronic illness, the problems can be more complex than first imagined. People who have permanent health insurance through their employers feel safe in the knowledge that such an eventuality, hitherto considered unlikely, is covered. However, I have discovered that the illness can often be the least of an individual's worries.

The 1996 OFT report was set up because

"the various health insurance products appeared to be complex, with sales often made to vulnerable consumers, and there appeared to be substantial scope for misunderstanding and mis-selling".

The report dealt mainly with permanent health insurance taken out by individuals, who have recourse to the services of an ombudsman. It did not deal with the group insurance policies taken out by employers. The difference between the policies is that one has access to arbitration.

In the report, the OFT states that

"it should be borne in mind that some 60 per cent. of those who are covered are protected by group policies—and the most vociferous of disappointed claimants fall almost exclusively in this category."

The problems that it highlighted are: difficulty in making claims, probably due to ill health; difficulty obtaining redress; and inadequate knowledge of the terms and conditions of the policy. There is an apparent lack of regulation in that part of the insurance industry that leaves a small but significant number of people vulnerable to sharp practices by unscrupulous insurance companies. In many instances, those people suffer the pain and anxiety of having recently been diagnosed as suffering from chronic illnesses that have forced them to give up employment.

I became aware of the issue through the case of my constituent, Mrs. Doreen Buckland. She is insured with the largest insurance company in the United Kingdom, UNUM, which mainly practises in the group permanent health insurance field. Only 10 per cent. of its clients are individual private health insurance customers. In the booklet that UNUM gives to its claimants regarding its disability counsellors, it describes itself as follows:

"Over the years UNUM has firmly established a position throughout the United Kingdom as market leader in Group Long Term Disability Insurance.

Its parent company, UNUM Corporation, an American specialist insurance company was established in 1848 and now has assets of $15.5 billion.

The combined strength of the two major transatlantic forces in this field enables UNUM to provide clients with products and services of the highest standard and confirms UNUM as the world leader in disability insurance."

Mrs. Buckland suffers from lupus disease, which has 30,000 sufferers in this country, 90 per cent. of whom are women. Unlike other illnesses such as myalgic encephalomyelitis, which also relates to this subject and to which I think other hon. Members will refer, it is a certified disease that can be identified and clearly diagnosed. She had been ill for seven to eight years and was finally diagnosed as suffering from lupus disease in 1997. That was confirmed in a letter from a consultant rheumatologist at Queen Mary's hospital, Sidcup, on 3 December 1997. The company that employed her submitted a claim to UNUM in February 1998. Under the terms of the policy, she should have received payment from UNUM in the following March, but instead she was visited by a UNUM counsellor who, in her words,

"was not interested in my problems but was merely looking for reasons for UNUM to reject my claim".

In April 1998, a letter to UNUM from Dr. Timothy Godfrey, a consultant rheumatologist at Guy's hopsital, set out the condition from which Mrs. Buckland was suffering and confirmed it as systemic lupus erythematosus. In May 1998, Mrs. Buckland was granted disability living allowance. Later that month, UNUM sent a letter declining her benefit and any liability under the terms of the contract.

On 29 May 1998, immediately after receiving the letter, Mrs. Buckland's employer wrote to UNUM outlining its concerns about the decision and the disregard for her medical condition. The employer then appointed an independent professional insurance marketing services company to prepare an appeal. A visit was made to UNUM, which was dealt with by two of its representatives. Mr. Williams, an agent of the consultants appointed by Mrs. Buckland's employers, said:

"We had hoped that discussion of the claim and the effects of Mrs. Buckland's illness would result in reconsideration, but it was obvious that UNUM's claims manager had no authority. It was also clear that"

the two representatives—I shall not name them—knew little about lupus disease. Mr. Williams continued:

"We were advised that Mrs. Buckland would have to return to work and become ill again before the claim could be considered. That apparently UNUM do not think she is ill enough already."

[Mr. Clive Efford]

I am sure that hon. Members will recognise such practices.

The appeal was supported again by Dr. Godfrey, who quoted from "Understanding Lupus", a book by a leading authority on the subject, his colleague Dr. Hughes. The appeal was also supported by a certified counsellor from Lupus UK, the consultant at Queen Mary's hospital, Sidcup, Dr. Bamji, and by a letter from Mrs. Buckland's general practitioner regarding her mental and physical fatigue. In the letter from the consultants contracted by Mrs. Buckland's employers to deal with the appeal, Mr. Williams quotes Sir Richard Baylis, an eminent endocrinologist with experience of cases involving the claims of lupus sufferers, many of whom have also been denied benefits by insurance companies. Sir Richard Baylis offered his assistance and suggested that Dr. Graham Hughes, who wrote the book "Understanding Lupus", would provide evidence.

Subsequently, in August 1998, UNUM requested that Dr. Godfrey prepare a report on the effects of stress on lupus sufferers. Dr. Godfrey responded by saying that he would want payment to undertake such major research and that significant scientific evidence already confirmed such effects. In September 1998, the Department of Social Security wrote to Mrs. Buckland, apparently satisfied with her condition, and confirmed that she no longer needed to provide medical certificates to receive incapacity benefit. That showed the difference between the treatment of Mrs. Buckland by the state and her treatment by the company, which was trying to use every possible tactic to deny her benefit.

On 9 September 1998, UNUM rejected Mrs. Buckland's appeal because her lupus was in remission. That was despite the medical opinion that returning to work would make Mrs. Buckland's lupus worse and despite the fact that stopping work had halted the deterioration in her condition. Under the conditions of the contract with her employer, Mrs. Buckland should have been receiving benefit. In October 1998, UNUM sent Mrs. Buckland to a consultant psychiatrist, Mr. George Reseck of Harley street, who started the interview by asking her whether she was happy. He then asked her what books she read and concluded by sympathising with her in her "battle" with UNUM.

In January 1999, UNUM rejected Mrs. Buckland's appeal and again gave remission as the reason for that rejection. It agreed to make a payment, and required Mrs. Buckland to undergo the psychiatrist's recommended treatment. Later that month, Mrs. Buckland visited her GP who had received a letter from UNUM recommending that she be sent for therapy and given anti-depressant medication. Mrs. Buckland's GP rejected the need for anti-depressants and stressed that she had extreme reactions to any medication due to her lupus.

I asked my constituent to describe the effects of her condition. She replied that her symptoms could change from hour to hour and from day to day. She said that it could result in aching joints, sudden seizures and loss of the use of her hands, chronic fatigue which could last for several weeks, numerous severe headaches each week, pain when walking up slight inclines and the constant feeling of suffering. She described the pains as those that one experiences when suffering a severe dose of flu. Mrs. Buckland said:

"I did not expect to become too ill to work but I felt secure by the insurance protection my employer gave its employees. My life has been completely changed by my illness and everything I have worked so hard for will now be lost because of the unbelievable treatment I have received from UNUM."

So extreme are the practices of that company that a UNUM support group has been set up for people in a similar situation to that of Mrs. Buckland. It has 250 members and estimates that 4,000 people are in similar situations throughout the country. It is not only people in the United Kingdom who are suffering such problems. There is documented evidence from throughout the United States, where UNUM is the largest company that provides such insurance cover. There is evidence of such cases from Australia and Canada, and I have no doubt that people in other countries also suffer as a result of the sharp practices of UNUM and similar companies.

Mrs. Buckland has said that she is likely to lose everything that she has built her life around and I can quote details of a similar situation experienced by a person in America. He said:

"Next month, my wife, my daughter and I will likely see our home sold on the courthouse steps."

That quote from someone across the Atlantic almost mirrors exactly the words used by Mrs. Buckland when describing her condition. It is time that we took action to close such a loophole. I appreciate that Adjournment debates cannot be used to call for legislation, but clearly such a problem, albeit for a small, but not insignificant, number of people, must be addressed. Evidence shows that companies are actively exploiting the loophole. Contracts that are held with them, not the individuals, leave it to the company to take action to ensure that the individual is paid benefit. If the company does not take action on behalf of its employee, the only course of action left is to risk financial ruin by fighting expensive court cases against companies that sit back and say, "Sue us, if you dare."

It is our duty to deal with the issue and not leave individuals who are at their most vulnerable to the mercies of unscrupulous companies. There is evidence of sharp practice and the constant moving of goal posts. Each time a medical report was producted to support Mrs. Buckland's case, for example, the slightest opportunity for the company to claim that there was no definite proof that her illness prevented her from returning to work was used in the face of overwhelming medical opinion. When faced with a court case, such companies often settle it before it is brought before a judge. Medical opinion of experts from whom the companies claim to have obtained evidence would be subject to cross-examination and companies could face exposure of fraudulent activities. All claimants are sent to a psychiatrist, whose diagnosis is subject to questionable decisions. One of the side effects of Mrs. Buckland's disease is that she cannot use medication.The fact that she is not taking medication is used by UNUM as evidence that she cannot be suffering. It has moved the goal posts yet again.

The Government must take action. Perhaps the Financial Services and Markets Bill will offer them the opportunity to do so. I conclude my remarks by referring to Mrs. Buckland's description of the dreadful stress that has been placed on her by UNUM at a time when she is at her lowest and has lost all feeling of self-worth. She considers that she has been accused of trying to get something for nothing and feels that every aspect of her life is under investigation. It is time that the issue was brought to an end.

2.49 pm

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on securing a debate on this issue and on explaining the case of his constituent, Mrs. Buckland, so well. He finished on the point that it is an individual who is being affected by the policy and the way in which it is handled, and we should remember that. At a time when people are at their lowest, they have to confront the added hurdle of the safety net that they thought that they had turning into a nightmare of legal action.

I was asked by a constituent to take part in this debate when he heard that it was happening. He took the company, which used to be called Nel Permanent Health Insurance, to court. His policy is now with UNUM. The case was not settled on the court steps; the court had to deal with it. Mr. Porter was a diver in the North sea when he developed angina. The insurance company said that it should not continue to pay him because he had failed to mitigate his illness by not having a heart bypass operation. Even with the operation, he would still be unable to dive, and, as was pointed out by the sheriff, a person has to decide whether to subject himself to the risk of major heart surgery, and is entitled to do that for himself.

The insurance company lost on that argument. The company also claimed that the claimant was able to do clerical work and had been offered a clerical job, but could produce no evidence of that fact. It failed in the court on both grounds. I understand from Mr. Porter that his case is now used by others to highlight the fact that the purpose of such a policy is to protect someone against being unable to carry out the employment for which he is trained and that he is capable of doing. Mr. Porter found it an extremely stressful experience, and I hope that others will not have to go through such court procedure.

Another constituent has the more general problem of having a policy that is a group policy in the name of a past employer, with subscriptions having been paid as a deduction from earnings. There is a problem about the legal relationship with the insurance company and how to claim benefit for a back problem, which has put my constituent out of work as a health carer in a nursing home. Both constituents paid towards their insurance policies, believing that they had a security net, but when they needed the safety net, it was far more difficult to make use of it than they had been led to believe.

The Minister needs to consider carefully how to regulate the industry to maintain confidence. Many people are insured with insurance companies, but they have limited professional experience. They take out contracts with a large company, which obviously has great experience of claims. Individuals, hopefully, go through life without having, or rarely having, to make a claim, so they cannot be treated as having the same legal training or professional expertise as the company with which they have entered into a contract.

There is a duty on the insured to be honest and forthright with the insurer, but, in many ways, the insurer should have a duty to consider the needs of the insured and to treat him fairly. That balance seems to be wrong at present. The insurer knows that the insured is at his weakest when making a claim. There is always a problem for claimants, but it is worse for those claiming from their permanent health insurance policies. Their physical well-being is not what it should be; that is why they are out of work and have lost their employment. They are not at their fittest to tackle making a claim.

Those of us who believe in markets and the freedom of the individual cannot remove the problem completely, but we can try to ensure that there is an effective system of regulation and a level playing field. People must have access to the ombudsman and the ability to sort out disputes on policies. The wording of such policies should be unambiguous, so that people know what they are taking on and what risks are covered. Clearly, if a low premium is paid, not much future risk will be covered. That must be made clear to people. They need to know the level of risk that is being covered and they must understand the contract that they are entering into.

Confidence is important to all those involved in the market. Those who want to provide good and effective policies need to know that the market is well regulated and fair, so that the product is not undermined by the experiences of others. If people do not have confidence in permanent health insurance, the whole market suffers. If we want people to make financial provision for their future, we must ensure that the markets are properly regulated. Permanent health insurance must be understandable and seen to be fair, so that people will have the confidence to take out policies.

I urge the Minister to approach these issues carefully and with an open mind, to see what she can do to ensure that, in future, people do not have to go through a court case to settle problems. They need safe and effective access to permanent health insurance.

2.56 pm

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on securing this important debate, and I am sure that note will be taken of it, even though it is taking place in Westminster Hall rather than on the Floor of the House.

Like other hon. Members, I heard of the antics of UNUM from a constituent—Audrey Gregory, whose husband Keith left work because of ill health in 1993. Keith Gregory worked for Scapa, a company dealing with industrial filters. Sadly, he has been unable to work for six years because he suffers from angina, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure and osteoporosis. Dr. Eardley, my constituent's well-respected GP, concluded that Mr. Gregory would never be well enough to work again, but would have to rely on benefits. UNUM disputed the diagnosis. Although Mr. Gregory was accepted as being sufficiently disabled to claim disability living allowance, UNUM would not

[Charlotte Atkins]

accept his level of disablement. The company did not examine him; it even refused to meet him when he requested it to do so.

Permanent health insurance cover, through UNUM, was part of Keith Gregory's employment contract, but he was never issued with details of the scheme. In fact, Mr. Gregory discovered that he was not even the claimant; he was simply a third party. The company—Scapa—was responsible for making claims. On seeing a letter by accident, Mr. and Mrs. Gregory discovered that the company was busily doing a deal with UNUM behind their backs—agreeing to pay a fellow worker, but not to pay out to Mr. Gregory. He was to be left in the lurch. Mr. Gregory will hear today whether the company has done the right thing at last, and agreed to pay out—six and a half years after he was forced to give up work. It is an appalling story, but, as we have heard today, it is by no means unique.

Although UNUM is the United Kingdom's largest disability insurer, it has been involved in a series of claims disputes in Britain. It has just lost its court case against Rachel Wadsworth. In another UNUM case, Alison Whitby was declared unfit for work, as she was suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome. That was in March 1996. In February 1999, the bank for which she worked—Warburg Dillon Read—sent her forms to complete, in relation to a claim under UNUM's permanent health insurance. Despite overwhelming medical evidence, which showed that she was seriously ill, matters dragged on for Alison. UNUM even employed a private investigator to follow her.

In April 1998, Alison was informed that not only had UNUM turned down her claim under its permanent health insurance scheme, but the bank was terminating her employment. It was only through her union, which was not even recognised by the bank for negotiating purposes, that she found a satisfactory outcome. Her case was lodged with the employment tribunal, alleging unfair dismissal and breaches of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. Eventually—surprise, surprise—the bank settled out of court.

UNUM is not the only culprit. Many companies have been handling claims in ways that have resulted in more people being denied payouts when, on all other criteria, they would assume that they had good grounds for success. Those companies expanded their operations on the back of the November 1993 Budget, when it became clear that invalidity benefit would be replaced by incapacity benefit. It was obvious that the amount of money going to the sick and disabled would be much reduced.

The clear message was that people would have to fend for themselves. That message did not go unheeded by the insurance companies. Lurid advertisements with graphic tables were designed to shock people into protecting themselves with long-term disability policies—individually and, increasingly, through employers. The then Secretary of State for Social Security, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), invited UNUM's vice-president, Dr. John le Cascio, to help with the extensive training of doctors needed for the new all-work test. Those tough new tests were fundamental to the savings that the right hon Gentleman hoped to achieve. Dr. le Cascio was therefore helping to validate a scheme that was being exploited by UNUM to drum up business in the United Kingdom.

Those insurance policies are now being claimed against, and it is up to UNUM and the other companies to deliver on their promises. They must be made to honour their responsibilities as insurers. The lives of many people depend on it.

3.2 pm

Mr. Anthony D. Wright (Great Yarmouth): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on securing this important debate. In my role as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on myalgic encephalomyelitis, it has often been drawn to my attention that many people with chronic illnesses face problems in securing their right to the health insurance payments for which they have paid contributions. Indeed, the group intends to investigate the matter more thoroughly at its next meeting.

ME is a debilitating condition, the cause of which is still not known. As it is difficult to diagnose the illness, people suffering from it face prejudice from some corners of the medical profession. For many, that has a knock-on effect when it comes to claiming benefits and insurance payouts.

One of the most respected and renowned doctors in the field of ME is Dr. Betty Dowsett. She has advised a number of people with ME who have had difficulty in claiming sickness insurance. Dr. Dowsett ran a clinic for infectious diseases in south Essex; occasionally, during the first 20 years, she was asked by insurance companies to provide comprehensive medical reports on patients with ME, for which they usually offered a standard fee. However, from 1994 the procedure began to change. The comprehensive assessment was replaced with a pro forma offering two choices. The first was a good prognosis, indicating that the patient had been offered psychiatric assessment and recommended treatment, including cognitive behaviour therapy, graded exercise, and suitable drugs. The second choice was a poor prognosis, indicating that the patient believed that the illness had an organic basis and had not co-operated in psychiatric assessment or treatment. Patients were expected to fill out the pro forma themselves, although some of them asked Dr. Dowsett's advice.

I have seen a copy of that pro forma. It shows that insurance companies are prejudging the causes of and the treatments for ME before consensus has been reached in the medical profession. That is unfair to people with ME; they are often forced into undergoing therapy that is not proved to help, and that may even set them back. If they have been treated by an ME specialist who favours another method of diagnosis and treatment, they may find that their disability insurance payments cease.

According to Dr. Dowsett, it became increasingly common from 1997 for insurance schemes to refuse to pay retirement or sickness pay from company insurance schemes. She advised 17 patients between January 1997 and April 1998, of whom only three were fully successful in their claims. Several patients were forced to attend named psychiatric clinics and to receive cognitive therapy, graded exercise and psychoactive drugs. They were told that if they did not they would lose their pension rights.

To show the scale of the problem, I shall cite two cases that have been brought to the attention of the all-party parliamentary group on ME. The first is that of David Little, who, from 1984, worked as a financial adviser with Allied Dunbar. In 1986, he took the precaution of protecting his income against the possibility of sickness or disability; he took out an insurance policy with Allied Dunbar that was underwritten without any exclusions. He became ill and eventually, in October 1996, he was diagnosed as having ME. He had already begun to manage his illness by taking plenty of rest, and in April 1997 he was able to return to work with the support of his colleagues. Disability payments were agreed on a proportionate basis while he was rehabilitating.

In December 1997, Mr. Little suffered a further relapse, and he has not been able to work at all since January 1998. At first, Allied Dunbar made full payments under Mr. Little's insurance. However, in July 1998, he was asked to attend an independent medical. The independent consultant concluded that Mr. Little was unlikely to be able to return to work full-time, but that he should be able to manage part-time work. The Benefits Agency subsequently asked Mr. Little to attend an all-work test, and the consultant confirmed that Mr. Little was not fit to do any work.

Meanwhile, Allied Dunbar disqualified Mr. Little's disability claim. The firm offered him a further six months' rehabilitation, which is thought to be fair and justifiable. Mr. Little duly complained to the Personal Investment Authority ombudsman, who requested a full report. The ombudsman recently turned down Mr. Little's appeal on the ground that ME might not exist as an illness and that, if it did exist, it was of a psychological nature and Mr. Little was therefore in need of psychotherapy.

However, that judgment ignored the in-depth assessment of Mr. Little's illness by Dr. Andrew Wright. Dr. Wright is renowned for his work on ME. He is a member of the chief medical officers' working group that is looking into the illness. Mr. Little was recently referred to a psychiatrist by his general practitioner in order to prove that he was not in need of psychiatric help. Anyone who campaigns on behalf of people with ME would, to say the least, be disappointed that such an unenlightened view of ME was still being applied by an organisation meant to provide an impartial hearing for appellants.

The small print of Mr. Little's insurance policy states that, in the case of full disability, payments will be made until the age of 60. Mr. Little is now 53, but he has received no payment for a year and a half. The policy also states that, if there is any doubt about the medical diagnosis of the disability, the insurance company will always fall on the side of the client. However, despite the conflicting medical evidence in Mr. Little's case, Allied Dunbar has failed to side with the client. Since the loss of his insurance benefits, Mr. Little has separated from his wife and family as a result of financial pressures, and he is on the verge of losing his home and the other material possessions for which he has worked. That is despite the fact that he took the precaution of insuring against such an eventuality as long ago as 1986.

The second case that I wish to highlight is that of Miss P. Kidd. Miss Kidd wrote to me a month ago, outlining a similar story. She was a partner in a firm of solicitors when she became ill with ME in 1991. She was eventually forced to give up work in September 1992. Her insurers, Swiss Life, paid her under the terms of a private health insurance policy from April 1993. She has been to a wide range of medics and complementary medical practitioners in a bid to cure her condition, but none has been able to help her. Indeed, Swiss Life's own medics have confirmed her condition.

Miss Kidd has continued to battle against her illness, which leaves her bedridden for much of the time. This year, however, Swiss Life has changed its attitude. It forced her to see a psychiatrist with known views on the causation of ME by threatening to stop her payments; but she has been refused sight of the psychiatrist's report. She was then subjected to a month's surveillance; it naturally caused her great fear to realise that she was being followed.

Swiss Life, which operates a group policy for the firm, refuses to communicate directly with Miss Kidd, although she remains a partner. The insurance company told her firm that it had evidence that her claim was false and requested a meeting with a representative at which Miss Kidd was not to be present. Miss Kidd believes that video evidence taken when she was under surveillance may be the basis of Swiss Life's case. Like many ME sufferers, Miss Kidd's condition fluctuates: when she feels well enough, she tries hard to be independent and take care of herself. She is afraid that the video may, on the surface, show her to be fit and able. However, anyone familiar with ME knows that a day's exertion may mean a week's relapse.

Miss Kidd is most troubled by the fact that she will be unable to represent herself when Swiss Life makes its claim to her firm. Should it withdraw Miss Kidd's benefits, she will be forced to fight the insurance company through the courts. That is a terrible prospect for someone suffering from ME, as the stress and exertion involved will undoubtedly lead to a deterioration.

What troubles me most about the cases that I have mentioned is not the fact that insurance companies question the legitimacy of the claims—that is their right and is no different from the Government's investigation of benefit claimants—but the manner in which they undertake those investigations. I have been contacted by Monica Dale, who runs Campaign Advice Support and Help—CASH—which helps people with ME facing problems with their private health insurers. She has told me that insurance companies take extreme measures when undertaking surveillance, such as camping outside people's houses.

Mrs. Dale believes that most insurance companies regard ME as a psychiatric illness and think that people suffering from it should undergo cognitive behavioural therapy. She believes that that treatment may help people with ME to manage their illness better, but that it is not a cure. The waiting list for the treatment is up to a year and only a few cognitive behaviour therapy treatment centres are aware of ME. Worst of all, many insurance companies cut off benefits while people are awaiting treatment, creating financial hardship for ME sufferers and their families.

The cases that have come to the attention of the all-party parliamentary group on ME in the past few months are only the tip of the iceberg. When faced with action by an insurance company, many people with ME

[Mr. Anthony D. Wright]

may be too ill to fight and may just accept such treatment. I know that to be the case for many who have been denied disability benefits. Insurance companies that take unilateral decisions on the diagnosis and care of people suffering from ME—about the aetiology and treatment of which there is controversy—are, to say the very least, not following good practice. Insurance companies are not prepared to accept ME as a permanent illness. Unfortunately, however, for many people that is the reality. The fact that some are fortunate enough to recover and lead a normal life does not mean that that is possible for every ME patient.

For someone with ME, the most damaging feature is that stress may severely disrupt recovery; indeed, it may exacerbate the condition and cause regression. All those who contacted me about problems with their insurance companies have undergone terrible stress and their health has suffered accordingly. I urge insurance companies to look long and hard at their policies as well as their treatment of people with ME and other chronic illnesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham will continue his campaign, and his efforts will have the support of the all-party parliamentary group on ME.

3.13 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I congatulate the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on securing an important debate in which I have an interest. I am grateful to the Minister for attending our debate; she will have plenty of time to respond.

Mention has been made of my constituent, Rachel Wadsworth, who successfully brought a case against UNUM. However, we should not concentrate purely on UNUM, although it seems to be especially accident-prone. The problem is that insurance companies are keen to make contracts to cover people, but fail to pay out. There is a slight difference between insuring a washing machine for on-going effectiveness and insuring people. A company that insures washing machines knows how reliable different makes are. There is probably little doubt about a machine that does not work and people have some idea how to mend it.

With humans, that is harder, as it is often difficult to know an individual's baseline. How fit is someone? What pre-existing maladies does he or she have? Some of those maladies may be known to the patient, but others may not. Insurance forms for washing machines set out a clear contract and one knows exactly what one is getting for one's money. However, some glossies—especially for group permanent medical insurance cover—do not make clear the benefits that people may get or under what circumstances. The signatories, however, clearly commit themselves or their firm to a weekly payment.

I am alarmed to hear from hon. Members that insurance companies can insist on a treatment set out by their medical assessors, who are doctors employed by them.

Mr. Efford: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. In the case of my constituent, Mrs. Buckland, one of UNUM's decisions was based on a medical report by someone who had never met her.

Dr. Brand: That illustrates what a nonsense all this is. People have a right to choose medical advisers and those who treat their illness. They also have a right to accept advice and treatment, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) explained. They cannot be forced to accept a certain treatment, whether cardiac surgery or cognitive psychotherapy. If people are ill, they are ill. Clearly, an insurance company has the right to seek medical advice about the validity of a diagnosis. It may be kind and offer help by suggesting a certain treatment. It cannot, however, insist on that treatment being carried out by its own clinicians or others. That obviously leads to undesirable muddying of responsibilities.

I was interested to learn that UNUM has advised the Benefits Agency's medical division. That explains some of the unimpressive decisions made by doctors on behalf of the Benefits Agency. However, the most important point to bear in mind is that people are encouraged to take out cover. I support that as a former self-employed person, it would be irresponsible not to have cover. However, the contract that is signed must be transparent. We would like the Government to introduce some form of regulation so that insurance contractual arrangements are clear and open from the outset.

I get upset when people fill in forms committing them to a large on-going financial outlay without seeking medical advice. They do that to buy peace of mind. Insurance companies take on that risk without seeking medical reports. However, as soon as there is a hint of a claim, they contact any doctor they can find to discover whether there is an undisclosed previous condition which may allow them not to pay out. That clearly means that the playing field is not level.

We have heard about the extraordinary lengths to which insurance companies will go to find information. Companies' resources are not matched by those of the insured, especially when ill. A valid point was made about people with myalgic encephalomyelitis. Stress is probably as big a contributory factor to a relapse as the conditon itself.

I hope to hear something positive from the Minister about contracts. We need an arbitration service that is accessible to all, irrespective of whether the individual has a contract through a company scheme. If the company is an agent of the insurance company, the company can be got at, or it should act for its employee; at present that relationship is not clear. However, if the company acts as a go-between between an individual and the insurance company, the individual should not lose the right to go directly to any arbitration scheme that covers that set of insurance.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's answer to this important debate. It is interesting that a Treasury Minister is to respond, given that an Opposition health team has—I was going to say "attacked", but that is not the right word—tried to find a solution to a problem that we have all recognised for some time.

3.21 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on raising an important subject. To me, it is desirable that as many people as possible should have

permanent health insurance. The House of Commons pensions arrangements were recently examined to see what scope there was for improvement: Members of Parliament do not have PHI, and I suggested that it might be wise to ensure that we do. We live in a stressful society. People have road accidents, strokes and all sorts of other ghastly things that render them unable to work for the rest of their lives, yet the total number of people to whom such things occur is small.

Insurance, in principle, is the correct way of dealing with the problem and it is sensible to have employer insurance arrangements: they bulk up the risk and save on the administration. Despite all that on the plus side, it is no good if a scheme does not work—not just because it fails to deliver what it ought to deliver, but because there is no practical way for people to resolve disputes. In the United States, success fee lawyers will work on almost any case, usually free of charge if the case is a good one; but in this country such arrangements operate to only a modest extent.

Two thoughts occur to me. First, this area of insurance should be covered by the Financial Services and Markets Bill. Paragraph 20 of schedule 2 to that Bill refers to:

"Rights under a contract of insurance, including rights under contracts falling within head C of Schedule 2 to the Friendly Societies Act 1992."

Will PHI be covered by the Bill, as that seems to imply? Secondly, ombudsman facilities should be available so that people can get inexpensive justice. If the ombudsman finds against a person, it may be tragic, but at least he will have had fair justice. Part XV deals with the financial services ombudsman: under clause 201, the Financial Services Authority can apparently determine that such territory is covered by compulsory jurisdiction, but the wording is obscure, so I ask the Minister to confirm my interpretation.

One of the things that I learned when I went to see the new ombudsman at the FSA was that the whole of the ombudsman arrangements were born within the insurance industry, which was endeavouring to earn itself brownie points by dealing with disputes in a way that would make its clients happy and was not carried out internally. I can understand that to pay an income for life requires a large sum and that the industry must be careful with its resources, but what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Given that the whole ombudsman scheme is modelled on the insurance ombudsman scheme that was set up by the industry, I would be disappointed if the FSA could not determine that the ombudsman should be able to resolve such cases. There is a slight technical issue in that a person may have his own PHI, or it may be part of a company's cover and the company may be the client of the insurance company. Clause 201 certainly provides that someone using the scheme does not have to be an individual and so could be a body corporate, but the individual beneficiary of the corporate membership should clearly be able to use the corporate membership's right to seek to obtain a judgment by the ombudsman.

Amusingly, there is an imbalance within the ombudsman scheme. One would have thought that both sides would be bound by his findings, but that is not the case. The company is bound by the ombudsman, but the individual has the right to go to law. That was volunteered by insurance companies when setting up ombudsman arrangements. Although it is somewhat difficult to argue, the logic went that no one would go to the expense of using the courts after having gone to an ombudsman and lost, as it would not be sensible or affordable to do so. That is the problem here. Unless he can use an ombudsman scheme, no one who is thrown out of work by a permanent disability can afford to use the courts to fight his case. Therefore, I conclude by asking the Minister whether the relevant clauses of the Bill cover that territory and whether the FSA intends, under the designation for the ombudsman scheme, to cover the ombudsman scheme dealing with this type of dispute.

3.28 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on securing this debate on such an historic day. It is the last parliamentary day of the century and, indeed, the millennium. The subject matter measures up to the importance of the occasion. Health insurance, its development and wider availability, might come to be seen as one of the great success stories of social policy in this century. Health insurance is crucial to every living and breathing person in this country. It provides a safety net. It helps to protect those who are unable to work because of illness and who might otherwise fall into financial hardship and poverty. It can speed up the availability of treatment bringing unwell individuals back into the healthy work force that much more quickly.

There has been a huge change in peoples' lives and what they can expect out of those lives over the past hundred years. In 1900, there was no national health service. Poor people could not often afford to go to a doctor. Despite traditions of mutuality, few could have afforded to take out insurance in the event that they became incapacitated and unable to work, even if such insurance had been available. Today, there is a thriving and popular national health service, which is complemented by the private health insurance market.

There are four main types of private health insurance. Private medical insurance arrangements are offered to individuals or employers, enabling prompt treatment of a range of illnesses, in both public and private sector hospitals. Secondly, long-term care insurance is offered to meet the costs of medical care in old age, if such costs are incurred. Critical illness insurance offers cash benefits payable in full, once the existence of a named disease such as breast cancer is proven. Permanent health insurance—the subject of this debate—is a form of private insurance that offers limited income replacement, usually from a time shortly after a permanent inability to carry on one's chosen trade or profession has been established: this lasts until normal retirement age.

Permanent health insurance shares characteristics of other long term or life insurance products. The contract, once agreed, is generally irrevocable by the insurer, provided that the insured continues to pay premiums in full and on time. If the insured becomes unwell or suffers a debilitating illness, the insurer cannot choose to opt out of the contract or to increase the premiums. Like

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

other insurances, which are essentially contracts made between one party and another, both sides have rights and obligations arising from the contract.

The permanent health insurance market is quite large. In 1998, 1.4 million income protection insurance policies were in force, as well as 1.5 million group policies. Premiums received by insurance companies amounted to nearly £750 million, although £638 million was paid out in benefits to United Kingdom policyholders. With premium income being taken well before benefits may become payable, and considering that over the lifetime of a 25 or 30-year contract the money paid by an individual is considerable, it is clearly important to put in place a regulatory framework to protect the customer—the policyholder. Protection must guard against market failure in terms of the insurer's financial solvency, and its ability to meet its liabilities to its policyholders.

The regulatory framework in the UK is, for the most part, contained in the Insurance Companies Act 1982 and regulations made under that Act. The Act also implements requirements of EU law. The framework for EU law on insurance business—essentially, single market measures—reflects the different regulatory concerns as between life and non-life business. There are three life, and three non-life directives, whose purpose is to promote open markets, but markets in which it is safe to do business.

Of the four types of private health insurance, private medical insurance is usually sold with characteristics of general insurance, as opposed to life and long-term insurance. From the policyholders' point of view, much general business is free from certain risks associated with long-term financial products: the contract is renewable each year; there is limited risk of financial loss if a policy is surrendered or lapsed; and there is not the uncertainty that attaches to investment return, as with some life insurance products. With many personal lines of insurance such as private medical, buildings and contents and motor insurance, the individual consumer can shop around and take advantage of changes in rates and in the extent of cover. That means that the consumer has more control and more responsibility.

Permanent health insurance is different. A customer who has signed one contract has some scope for cancelling and seeking a new provider; but premiums are often higher for those who take out policies later in life. Once a permanent health insurance policy is agreed, it tends to stay in place for some years—often until retirement, and sometimes until the customer decides that his needs have changed and the insurance is no longer necessary.

There is a difference between the regulation of permanent health insurance and some other long-term insurances. Permanent health insurance is not subject to the regulation imposed on investment-linked insurances, such as unit trust savings contracts with some life cover offered as part of a package. That does not mean that the selling of permanent health insurance is unregulated—far from it. The non-statutory Association of British Insurers code of practice governs the sale of such policies, so the regulatory framework bears on the insurers in terms of monitoring their ability to meet their liabilities, and their selling practices.

If something goes wrong, most insurance companies now have internal complaints handling systems, complemented by an independent redress system. Members of the ABI belong to the insurance ombudsman scheme, the Personal Insurance Arbitration Service or the Personal Investment Authority Ombudsman Bureau. Of course, when the Financial Services and Markets Bill is enacted, all will come under the financial services ombudsman scheme, and the ABI code may be replaced by the rule book of the General Insurance Standards Council in the next year or so. Therefore we are at a point of great change.

These complaints handling systems covers areas such as claims made by customers against insurers within the terms of the insurance policies. The non-statutory code of practice is subject to a monitoring committee. Drawing on experience, the code is updated from time to time.

Let me turn in more detail to the ways in which the code will work and to some of the issues raised in the debate. The ABI has never managed to persuade its members that a code of practice or statement on claims handling would be desirable. I believe that it tried to do this a year or so ago, but that it could not convince them that a code would not intrude on the ability of companies to maintain their competitiveness. They were also concerned that it would be too general to be useful.

The Financial Services Authority's role focuses on its prudential financial supervision, but I hope and expect that the single ombudsman scheme, linked to the FSA's consumer panel—a new body within the FSA—and to supervisors, will ensure that persistent poor performers are spotted easily. Early identification of poor performers, and drawing them to consumers' attention, was one of the issues that ABI members raised.

Mr. Efford: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the FSA will have more scope than existing complaints or arbitration systems? Currently, individuals covered by group policies do not have access to that service.

Miss Johnson: I shall return to that point later. Access to the single ombudsman scheme is at present by third parties, but the FSA does not favour this. We take note of the comments of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight).

Hon. Members have set out well what happens when a customer claims to be unable to work, for example, because of an injury to his back. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham set out what happens to people who try to seek redress and assert their rights through the system, and gave as an example the case of Mrs. Buckland. Individual cases bring home to us the difficulties that some people experience with the current arrangements, and the cases that have been mentioned have been well set out. My hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) focused on the difficulty that two individuals have had in resolving their claims. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. D. Wright) made clear his knowledge of the difficulties that those who suffer from ME face when they pursue their claims through the relevant systems. I am grateful for that strong focus on what things are like for individuals.

A customer might claim for example, that he is unable to work because of ME or an injury to his back, or for the other reasons that hon. Members have given;

medical evidence might support that claim. All things being equal, the company should pay that claimant, unless it has good reasons to do otherwise. If it receives evidence that the customer with ME, a bad back or another complaint, has subsequently taken up high-board diving, it might want to review the case. However, we have clear evidence in the cases that hon. Members have mentioned that high-board diving would be out of the question for their constituents.

Disputed claims will always be a difficult issue. Insurers have obligations to all other policyholders not to pay out on fraudulent claims. Indeed, if premiums overall increase because claims are paid out too readily and without proper scrutiny, the costs involved will mean that potential customers are denied insurance. Obviously, we do not, in general, support such a development. However, the situation is clearly different in the cases before us.

Our objective is to protect policyholders. Insurance companies should be run by fit and proper management. Any evidence of systemic bad conduct should, in the first place, be taken up with the chief executives of the companies for internal review.

Sir Robert Smith: Will the Minister focus on what she means by "policyholder"? Does she mean the employee who seeks to benefit from the insurance policy, or the company, which is the policyholder in the case of group policies?

Miss Johnson: It would be for the group policyholder—the company—to decide whether to take matters up across the piece. It is for the company to be concerned about individual instances within their policy. However, I was primarily thinking about individuals who are concerned about the treatment that they receive at the hands of the insurance company. It is not in the long-term interests of insurance companies to promote poor-quality products or to cater badly for consumers. I hope that representatives of insurance companies are listening to the debate, because they will need to take that into consideration.

We have not made a commitment on naming and shaming. The FSA must decide how best to use its powers and carry out its consumer protection remit. The question about the financial services ombudsman scheme relates to third-party access. It is a matter for the FSA, which I hope will not ignore the sentiments that hon. Members have expressed when it considers how to construct its responses to the present situation.

It might be of interest to hon. Members to know that about 3 million people are covered by the relevant policies. There have been about 360 complaints to the various ombudsmen—or ombudspeople.

I welcome the attention that my hon. Friends and other hon. Members have drawn to the problems that their constituents have experienced. It is unwelcome that there is evidence of persistent procrastination and prevarication, but welcome that those who have spoken have drawn that evidence to the attention of many people through this debate. I hope that the matter will be taken up with insurance companies, and I am certainly prepared to take it up with the industry on behalf of those involved.

Mr. Efford: Does my hon. Friend agree that the number of claimants covered by a group policy who go to the ombudsman is insignificant because there is no ombudsman? One of the difficulties is that it is hard to get statistics because there is no means by which people can complain. Individuals are left with the choice of going to the courts, giving up because they are too ill to fight the company, or taking their case to Europe, which involves putting themselves at enormous financial risk when they are at their lowest ebb.

Miss Johnson: I note my hon. Friend's remarks. I am not sure that there can be no redress through the ombudsman. The ABI says that individuals in group policies have access to him.

Dr. Brand: I am following the Minister's remarks carefully because we are getting slightly conflicting views on the matter. I believe that individuals can go directly to the ombudsman, if they are supported by the policyholder—the company. However, the Minister is living in an unreal world if she believes that all companies love all their employees and ex-employees. Often, the disabled person involved might both have fallen out with the company that employs him and be making a claim against the insurance company.

Miss Johnson: The company is formally the policyholder in those wider cases, as has been intimated. My understanding of the case that my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham described is that the company backed the individual against its insurer; perhaps my hon. Friend will clarify the position.

Mr. Efford: I can certainly confirm that the employer acted in an exemplary fashion and pursued the case on behalf of its employee. However, it could complain only to the insurance company; there was no independent arbitration body to which it could go to pursue its case. It could go only to the courts.

I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the case of Mr. Villella, who was employed by MFI Furniture Centres Ltd. He went to court because his employer terminated his contract following UNUM's decision to refuse him any benefits under the terms of the insurance policy. He was forced to go to court. Eventually, he won his case against his employer, not against the insurance company. Does my hon. Friend agree that that has serious consequences for employers who take out insurance policies on behalf of their employees? If the insurance companies refuse benefits, firms might be challenged by their employees and become liable to court action. If that happens, employers will be wary of taking out insurance policies on behalf of their employees, because of their vulnerability in the courts.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions are welcome, but I caution hon. Members that they must be brief. I have been tolerant in this case and I hope that no one else will take advantage of my tolerance.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham for making that point. The existing ombudsman schemes will consider complaints from companies and individuals in group schemes. Although I accept that the company may also be burdened, insurance companies and those taking out group

[Miss Johnson]

policies should jointly consider the issue when the policies are drawn up. As for the point made by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), there are subtleties involved. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman to clarify the matter, and copy the letter to other hon. Members who have participated in the debate.

I should now like to deal with the issue in relation to the Financial Services and Markets Bill. It is important to recognise that making permanent health insurance subject to a conduct of business-type regulation—covering selling, marketing and point-of-sale issues—would not help in cases of poor or dubious claims handling, to which other hon. Members have drawn attention. Therefore, it is important that the industry should tackle that problem, although the Government and the authorities clearly have a role to play.

As the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs knows, general insurance is not covered by the Bill. I am therefore reasonably confident that health insurance is not covered either. Such matters will be dealt with in the scope order—a form of secondary legislation—which will not be made until the Bill has received Royal Assent, so I cannot be precise about what might be covered at that time.

UNUM is regulated by the FSA, but its practices are regulated by the ABI code. Practice in relation to customers can lead to references to the ombudsman and the courts. It is important to recognise that the contract of insurance is between the insurance company and the insured and is subject to the same contract law provisions as any other contract. That is one of the main focuses. However, I am concerned about the cases outlined by hon. Members, and I intend to bring them to the attention of the industry. Regulation will not necessarily deal with poor or dubious handling of individual claims—

Dr. Brand: Why not?

Miss Johnson: Because it will deal only with selling, marketing and point-of-sale regulation, not with bad handling of an individual, which will be subject to the normal process of redress through the ombudsman and so forth. Furthermore, given the evidence cited against some companies—especially UNUM, which has been mentioned in despatches too often in this debate—the FSA might want to discuss with the companies the issues raised today. That might resolve the question of whether such a method of handling consumer matters and cases is always the most appropriate.

The subject is important and I am grateful to hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. Although the Financial Services and Markets Bill will not be able to tackle the problems directly, a number of avenues are available for the raising of such issues. I shall do what I can—which is not without limitations—to ensure that the issues raised by hon. Members are taken up with the industry and that progress is made.

3.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Slaughterhouse Accreditation (Devon)

4 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this subject today. As a traditionalist, I should have preferred to discuss it on the Floor of the House of Commons, but times change, even if I do not change with them. The issue concerns the west country as a whole, and transcends divisions of town and country, and of party. It is sufficiently grave to have prompted the *Western Morning News,* a newspaper which normally uses modern terminology, to use phrases such as

"Rural area cannot take another blow".

I first raised this issue in the Chamber on 8 December and, several days later, I raised it again through another device. It may surprise some of those who have followed my career, such as it has been, to discover that I do not intend to attack the Government today. I attacked them in my previous speech, and I shall doubtless do so in my next, but today I do not intend to berate them. I am satisfied that the problem, which has resulted from a decision taken by the Intervention Board, is not directly of the Government's making, although only the Minister can solve it. If the decision is allowed to stand, from 4 January next year, Devon, a large county with one of the densest cow populations in the country, will have no abattoir at which cattle can be slaughtered under the over-30-months scheme. Cows in west Cornwall will be slaughtered at Madron Meat, but animals east of that point will have to be transported through Cornwall and Devon to one of three slaughterhouses in Somerset or Bristol.

We are not talking about placing one fit animal in its prime on a 125 express and delivering it quickly; animals will have to travel as much as 160 miles and endure a journey of more than three hours. In the main, such animals will be elderly, worn-out milking cows that are not in their first flush of youth and have never before left the farm on which they were born. For the first time in their lives—and, indeed, the last time—they will be carted and taken away. For such animals, any journey would be an imposition, but the current proposal is simply unaccepatable.

At the moment, the farmer transports a cow to the nearest slaughterhouse in a trailer. It is put on board by someone that it has known since it was born, and is delivered to the abattoir relatively quickly. I shall not discuss details with which the Minister is familiar, but animal transport regulations currently prevent the transportation of animals across great distances. However, in future, animals will be loaded on to a lorry with which they are unfamiliar by someone they have never seen before, and taken to a collection point, where they will be unloaded and then loaded again. They will then be taken on a last, long journey to abattoirs in Langport, Bridgwater or perhaps Bristol. I make no criticism of those slaughterhouses, but on arriving, the layerage will inevitably be limited, and animals that were collected early in the morning may well remain in lorries overnight. They will need to be milked. The consequences—the Minister and others will be familiar with the details—do not bear thinking about. As I have said, we are not dealing with beef animals in their prime, but tired, worn-out, elderly animals that may be lame or have damaged udders. For such animals, such a journey is unthinkable.

An urban audience is sometimes surprised to discover that farmers feel passionately about animal welfare, but this is the issue that will unite me and the Minister, whose track record on the matter is well known. We will not always reach the same conclusions on fox hunting or mink farming, but we share the belief that the welfare of animals is paramount. I know of no farmer who, the day that his cattle go for slaughter, is anything other than miserable. Slaughter is a necessary part of the life cycle, but farmers always greet that day in sombre mood. They will have known their animals—I use the word deliberately—intimately. They will have milked them twice a day for perhaps the past seven years. If animals are condemned to a final journey of the type that I have described, farmers will be genuinely distressed. Some 30 farmers are here today in the Public Gallery, not because of the extra burdens that will be placed on agriculture, but because they are concerned about animal welfare.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said, but the issue is not restricted to the west country. East Anglia, which no longer has a slaughterhouse, will face the same problems. Is my hon. Friend aware that more than 1,000 farmers—not members of the public—in East Anglia have signed a petition protesting at the removal of our slaughterhouse? Is he also aware that the Intervention Board appears not to have recognised those abattoirs that have made the necessary adaptations, and that, during this round, contracts have been awarded to companies that do not have operating abattoirs?

Mr. Nicholls: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A Minister told me last week that representations have been received from other parts of the country. Those who deal with such matters at the sharp end cannot comprehend the figures involved. It is not my usual style to attack civil servants, but the statement issued by the Intervention Board is unreal. It states that

"40 companies submitted tenders and these were evaluated against . . . criteria"

that included "location". It continues:

"The IB has ensured that the abattoirs are geographically well located, with an emphasis on the main production areas, so that travelling times for animals going to slaughter will not increase substantially."

I am not blaming the Minister yet, but I find that statement—which is advanced not as an argument but as fact—extraordinary. Anyone who knows the west country, the abattoirs and West Devon Meat, could not believe that the arrangements will ensure that abattoirs are

"geographically well located, with an emphasis on the main production areas, so that travelling times for animals going to slaughter will not increase substantially."

[Mr. Nicholls]

It is not only farmers and me who are concerned, but the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I shall quote the salient parts of a letter from John Avizienius, the RSPCA's senior scientific officer, to the Intervention Board. He says:

"The implications for poor animal welfare scenarios due to the extended journey times are extremely worrying, particularly at this time of year, when there will be inevitable waiting lists.

Also, we must be aware that many of the animals which are booked to go onto the scheme are at the older end of the age spectrum, and these in particular must not be subjected to these extra journey times.

Also, we must be aware that the Intervention Board has failed to consider this aspect of animal welfare when the decision was taken to close certain abattoirs."

This is an understatement, which would not necessarily be apparent to a politician. He concludes:

"The RSPCA would urge you to reconsider this decision in order to avoid imposing even more unnecessary stress onto the industry, which, as noted above, has the potential to compromise the welfare of both animals and farmers alike."

I make that point in the way in which it was made to me. If it proceeds, the decision will indeed impose extra burdens on an industry that is already reeling, but that is another speech for another time; the concern of those by whom I have been briefed today is animal welfare.

What is to be done? It cannot be claimed that the Intervention Board has fulfilled the remit with which it is charged. It is simply not sufficient to produce figures, and to add to them the formulaic expression that location has been properly considered. At Madron Meat, animal welfare can cost £30 a beast. At Southern Counties and Fresh Foods Ltd., a slaughterhouse in Somerset, the figure is £17.50. West Devon Meat is not so far above that, at about £22. However, the point about those figures is that this process has been carried out like a blind auction. The Intervention Board, once it realised where those slaughterhouses would have to be, should have told the slaughterhouses concerned what the target price might have been. Such an approach might conceivably have achieved something.

I believe that the solution is twofold. First, a temporary solution is that the decision should not be allowed to be implemented on 4 January. Secondly, the Minister should look at those figures as a matter of urgency and ask the Intervention Board to re-examine the representations made by me and by hundreds of people in the west country. Even if the Minister were minded to do that, it would not be sufficient unless coupled with action to ensure that this decision is not implemented on 4 January.

I probably shocked the Minister by saying that I would suspend the usual hostilities on this occasion. I urge her with whatever power I can command to look at the matter again. In terms of animal welfare, this decision cannot be allowed to stand. Whatever may disunite us in the House, whatever disunity may exist between urban and rural communities, and whatever our disagreements may be on agricultural matters, the one issue that unites virtually every hon. Member is a concern for animal welfare. This is pre-eminently an animal welfare decision and it cannot be allowed to stand.

4.12 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls). I am also grateful to the Minister for finding time in her busy schedule this morning to speak to me and my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) on this matter. I want to raise one or two points a propos that meeting, in connection with today's debate.

The Minister has kindly agreed to have the average tender figures re-examined, and I am grateful for that. I hope that due weight will be given in those figures to the fact that West Devon Meat is a most efficient organisation, and its costs for meat inspection are significantly lower than those in many other abattoirs. The disparity is about £6 a bullock.

I also draw the House's attention to the fact that, as the hon. Member for Teignbridge said, the allocation requirement for cull quota is higher in Devon than in any other county—virtually 1,000 beasts a week. The allocation for Cornwall is over 500 beasts a week, making a total of 1,500 beasts. All the cull quota given is effectively 300 beasts a week, as far south-west as one can get: Madron Meat in Penzance. That abattoir is about 190 miles from the nearest abattoir at Bridgwater.

This decision—which I hope will be reconsidered—will give rise to many problems, especially for the farming industry, which has been on its back in a depression for four consecutive years. In terms of cash flow, farmers will have to wait longer for their money. They will have to feed the animals, especially in winter, which will cost money. The decision will impose an additional cost of £20 a beast. Farmers receive only about £300 under the over-30-months scheme. Additional transport charges will cost an extra £10, as will collection point charges.

The hon. Member for Teignbridge has said—and, as one who has farmed for nearly 25 years, I agree—that farmers love their cattle, their sheep and their pigs. They are devoted to their animals. The majority of the animals in question will be suckler cows, and dairy cows. I cannot bear to think of the state in which those cows will be, if they have not been milked or sucked out for 24 hours. It is absolute cruelty to submit them to that.

Finally, I want to say a few words about the impact on Hatherleigh, which has for many years been my home town. Hatherleigh depends on this abattoir and on the market, which are interdependent, and it has had a terrible time over the past four or five years, as it depends so much on agriculture. I hope that the Minister will either reconsider this decision or endeavour to insist that the Intervention Board reconsiders it. Will she instruct the Intervention Board to allow transitional cull quota for West Devon Meat until the matter has been fully debated and resolved?

4.15 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on securing a debate on this issue. He said that, as a traditionalist, he was not keen on this forum. However, given that other proceedings are taking place in the main Chamber at present, this forum has provided an opportunity for this important matter to be debated

before the Christmas recess and before the operation date of 4 January, to which he and other hon. Members referred.

This debate gives us the opportunity to address the concerns raised by livestock farmers in the constituency of the hon. member for Teignbridge, in the south-west generally and around the country. I accept the point made in an intervention by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) that the subject is also of enormous interest to people in other parts of the country. I say that with a certain amount of feeling, because one of the unsuccessful tenderers was in my constitutency and in the north-east, my own part of the country, there has been concern about the practical implications of the changes. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) also raised with me the concerns of farmers in his part of the country.

I am conscious of all those concerns, and of the number of hon. Members raising those issues on behalf of their constituents and their regions. However, as a result of their representations, I have examined the situation closely. Hon. Members have urged me to have meetings with the Intervention Board: I have already done so. As the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) said, I met him and the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) this morning. I shall hold meetings with representatives of the National Farmers Union tomorrow.

There is a willingness to engage in this issue, but the hon. Member for Teignbridge is right to say that the Intervention Board is the department responsible for the administration of the over-30-months scheme throughout the United Kingdom. Therefore, in pursuing representations that have been made to me, I have consulted the board and received from it a full account of how the process evolved and the various conditions and procedures that have been gone through in order to reach the present stage.

Mr. Burnett: What weight would the Minister give to oral representations made by the Intervention Board to tenderers during the tendering process?

Ms Quin: The Intervention Board has conducted this process according to the rules laid down for a public procurement exercise, and for the exercise of a tender process. That certainly involved a stage of bid clarification, in which the competitive pressures and the factors that would influence the final outcome were explained to the tenderers. That bid clarification process offered an opportunity for explanation, particularly to West Devon Meat, which was involved in the process. I am satisfied that, at that stage, the Intervention Board explained the competitive pressures and the price competition that West Devon Meat was facing.

The previous tendering exercise for over-30-months scheme slaughtering services was debated in the House on 26 November 1997. The hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) was worried about the reduction in the number of scheme abattoirs that followed the Intervention Board's previous tender. I mention that at the outset to make the point that, although I understand hon. Members' anxieties, we have been through a similar process in the past, during which anxieties were expressed, and the outcome of that previous round was satisfactory. The process is rather ironic for the south-west, because at that time it involved Somerset farmers, worried mainly about transporting animals west, rather than Devon farmers worried about transporting animals east. Some of the anxieties expressed at that time were examined closely by the then Ministers in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

I should explain some of the background to the events under discussion. Since July 1997, 28 abattoirs in the United Kingdom have been slaughtering OTMS cattle. As hon. Members will know, effective implementation of the OTM rule and scheme is one of the central pillars of the Florence agreement to tackle the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis and its aftermath so as to build up consumer and European confidence and secure a normal operation of the European market, into which, as hon. Members from all parties know, we have put a huge effort.

The Government's negotiation of a partial lifting of the beef export ban suggests that the service that the plants provide has been found satisfactory by the majority of our European partners and, significantly, by the European Commission and the authorities in Brussels. It is clear that the scheme is now operating to the satisfaction of the majority of farmers, much more so than two or three years ago.

Between them, abattoirs slaughter about 750,000 OTMS cattle a year, at a cost of about £22 million, which is borne by the UK taxpayer. We also pay about £230 million a year to farmers in compensation under the scheme, of which about £160 million is reimbursed by Brussels. The 1997 tender, under which the current 29 contracts were awarded, reduced the cost of the service by about £12 million a year in comparison with the rates that had applied since 1996. As hon. Members will know, the Public Accounts Committee criticised the high rates paid to abattoirs when the OTMS was first introduced. Both the 1997 and the 1999 tender exercises have secured a better deal for the taxpayer.

Mr. Pickles: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Quin: Yes, but it must be the last time, or I shall not be able to make the points that I want to make.

Mr. Pickles: The Minister mentioned cost, but the Intervention Board mentioned seven other criteria, ranging from past track record to location. How did the Intervention Board decide against people who made a bid but did not operate an abattoir?

Ms Quin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right to flag up the fact that a range of criteria were involved. Especially in view of the emphasis that the hon. Member for Teignbridge understandably placed on animal welfare requirements, I should emphasise that price is not the only factor in the equation. However, price is important because of pressures from the National Audit Office and, not least, from the Public Accounts Committee, which has been vigorous in examining the cost of BSE measures. Although I realise that hon. Members are worried about agriculture in their own constituencies in particular, pressures operate in the House in respect of the scheme's financial consequences, and it is only fair for me to point that out.

[Ms Quin]

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar mentioned location, which is also a factor. Indeed, the Intervention Board has produced a map showing the location of not only abattoirs but the number of animals involved. In his constituency, the number of animals entering the system is much lower than elsewhere. Such factors must be considered in offsetting the overall arrangements and evaluating the criteria.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Quin: I shall give way, but the hon. Gentleman does himself a disservice in terms of time.

Mr. Nicholls: We shall know very soon.

Is the Minister seriously suggesting that a trip of 130 miles is appropriate for this class of animal? She will remember that I did not emphasise strongly the cost to farming. I based my argument almost entirely on welfare, and 130 miles is not acceptable.

Ms Quin: I did not claim that the hon. Gentleman emphasised the cost to farmers. I am not sure how he gained that impression. I have asked the Intervention Board about the 130-mile figure—the figure of 160 miles was cited in one press release. I do not believe that a journey of 130 miles will be involved. The fact that Madron Meat in Cornwall was allowed to continue is a prime example of how location can tilt the balance—even though the company quoted a lower price, given its average kill, than West Devon Meat. For Bridgwater, the most efficient and value-for-money tender in the country, the ratio was three to one in favour. The Intervention Board must consider both geographical spread and value for money. It would be irresponsible if it did not.

I reassure hon. Members that the new arrangements will not flout the maximum travelling times allowed for animals under our animal welfare rules. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point about our overall commitment to animal welfare, and the fact that the matter is a cross-party concern that does not divide parties. Animal welfare considerations are extremely important. West Devon Meat uses animals from outside Devon: 25 per cent. of its current throughput relates to animals from outside the county. In Devon, 50 per cent. of farmers already use the market system. Presumably, many will continue to do so, so that they do not transport their animals themselves.

I am perfectly willing to examine animal welfare considerations that hon. Members draw to my attention once the scheme has come into operation, and if the fears of the hon. Member for Teignbridge are realised.

Dr. Nicholas Priestley

4.30 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I am glad, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to have an opportunity to place on the record the case of my constituent, Dr. Nicholas Priestley—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. Will members of the public who want to leave this Chamber please do so quickly and quietly?

Mr. Chaytor: Dr. Priestley is a consultant neuropsychologist who works for a national health service trust. He is a chartered psychologist, he has a doctorate in clinical psychology, he is an associate fellow of the British Psychological Society and he is acknowledged to be a national expert in the treatment of head injuries. For several years, he has been a national expert witness; he is approved by the Law Society to work with cases involving head injury litigation.

In May 1995, Dr. Priestley was appointed lead consultant neuropsychologist for Highbank Healthcare Ltd., which is now a subsidiary of Westminster Health Care. It operates a head injury rehabilitation unit, which is in my constituency. In June 1996, Dr. Priestley was promoted to regional clinical director of the northern division of Highbank Healthcare. Two years later, in June 1998, he resigned his post after two years of systematic harassment by other senior members of staff, most of whom are no longer employed by Highbank Healthcare.

Before I go into greater detail, I must stress that I cannot comment on any of the professional clinical issues that are involved in the dispute, and I do not want to make a general criticism of the personnel policies of Highbank Healthcare or of Westminster Health Care. I want to focus on my constituent's case, which raises important legal and procedural issues, and to highlight the unacceptable harassment that Dr. Priestley had to endure for two years.

Dr. Priestley's harassment took many forms. He was harassed by the manager of the unit, by a director of the company and by other members of the clinical staff. I hasten to add that he was not harassed by nursing or care staff. He was, essentially, isolated as a result of management restructuring, which did away with important parts of his role. His secretarial staff was taken away, which made it impossible for him to carry out his professional responsibilities, and he was excluded from social events to which all other members of staff were invited, including, most notably, the Christmas meal. He was excluded from staff training, he was told that his personality had to change and his suitability to deal with patients was challenged. I remind hon. Members that he already had an established reputation as a leading expert in his field. After Dr. Priestley returned from sickness in late 1997 and early 1998, one of the directors of the company told Dr. Priestley that he wished that he had not recovered or returned and that he wished that he had died.

As a result of this continuous pressure, Dr Priestley collapsed from a cardiac arrest in late 1997. During that period, he submitted almost 30 written and verbal

complaints to his management and to the company's personnel department. Those complaints document his concern and his sense of grievance and describe what he thought were professional misjudgment malpractices involving some colleagues. He also requested a copy of the company's equal opportunities policy, which needless to say, was not provided.

It may be asked why this case is different from many thousands of others that take place year in and year out across the country in different forms of employment. Two factors distinguish it from the routine cases of professional jealousy and minor harassment at work. The first involves the scale of harassment. I have with me a 30-page dossier that Dr. Priestley submitted to a tribunal. It details behaviour that goes far beyond what one would accept as reasonable. I have already referred to the fact that Dr. Priestley collapsed as a result of cardiac arrest. He was on the floor in a room to the rear of the unit. A manager in the unit, who was also a trained nurse, refused to call an ambulance. It was clear that Dr. Priestley's collapse was the result of chest pains. In view of the seriousness of the situation, it was obvious that the manager, who was acting on behalf of the company, was not prepared to do the basic, decent, human thing, which was to call an ambulance.

The second distinguishing factor involves the nature of the harassment that Dr. Priestley endured. It consisted, quite simply, of intense homophobia. Dr. Priestley is a gay man, and he does not seek to hide that fact. He did not consider that his sexuality would interfere in any way with his professional competence.

In order to convey the homophobic culture in the unit at which Dr. Priestley worked, I shall quote from one of the statements that he made to me at an earlier stage in our discussions:

"There was an established culture at Highbank of discrimination and abuse directed at some minority groups and my complaints about this were consistently ignored. In September 1997, I was taken ill at Highbank following an acute cardiac event. Although this occurred whilst I was with a manager (who was also a trained nurse) I was left alone in a back room and no ambulance was called. When I returned to work after a period of convalescence, I was told by a senior figure at Highbank that he wished I had not recovered. I was also informed that another member of Highbank staff expressed disappointment that I had not died . . .

A member of staff proposed there should be a formal risk assessment made of gay and lesbian employees because they were identified as a perceived 'threat' to patients at Highbank. I am aware that other employees at Highbank suffered similar distress to myself. Untrue allegations were generated that one staff member had AIDS. His formal complaints were not formally investigated. In June 1998, I reluctantly formed the view that my own position was no longer tenable because of the levels of discrimination, and I resigned."

It might be suggested that that is the view of a man who sees himself as a victim. If so, I shall quote from supporting evidence that was provided by another employee at the head injury rehabilitation unit. That employee stated:

"Before Nick started to work at Highbank, there was an established culture of homophobia and gay discrimination regarding any person whose lifestyle was viewed differently to the very 'traditional' and heterosexual culture that existed. I must stress that gay clients were also exposed to this judgmental and damaging conduct.

I witnessed staff members regularly making numerous debasing and sterotypical comments about gay and lesbian lifestyles. Nick was frequently treated in a most degrading manner, ranging from crude comments to outright abrasive treatment. Strategies of exclusion from social events and conversations were ongoing, and actively promoted as a cultural norm. Attempts made to right these were dismissed and no concern offered regarding the damaging effects that were clearly apparent. This ethos was rife throughout the hierarchy of the organisation. Clinicians and management would perpetuate and maintain the treatment of gay people as unimportant and indeed abhorrent . . .

Towards the end of my employment at Highbank, two health care workers expressed their distress and fear, describing experiences of discrimination within Highbank. They were desperate to reduce the shameful discrimination that occurred. As Nick supported them, commenting upon his own similar experiences, many members of the team became extremely hostile. . . .

I am further aware of how Nick Priestley's health and safety was gravely compromised by a nurse/manager at Highbank who did not call for help but walked away when he collapsed with left-sided chest pains whilst at work."

Towards the end of the time that Dr. Priestley worked at Highbank Healthcare, he decided that he had to take out a case of sex discrimination and victimisation. He took that to the Manchester employment tribunal in January 1998. The case was subsequently adjourned pending the outcome of another test case on a similar issue. In June 1998, he resigned his post, having found his position untenable, and took a further case to the tribunal for constructive unfair dismissal. That case was heard in March 1999.

The second stage of this extremely serious and distressing saga is the way in which Dr. Priestley was treated by the tribunal. His statement to the tribunal about his grievance states:

"Despite paying lip service to 'equal opportunities', I believe my employers have acted in a high handed and oppressive manner towards me. Despite both verbal and written requests, they have persistently failed to provide me with a copy of their Equal Opportunities Policy. They have failed in their duty of trust and confidence towards me in refusing to investigate my legitimate concerns in any proper or meaningful manner. They have also failed to provide me with a safe and proper system of working, and as a consequence of their acts and admissions, my health has suffered."

I should point out that his health continues to suffer.

Dr. Priestley's description of the events at the tribunal in March 1999 is intensely disturbing. I quote from this letter:

"From the first day of the hearing, the Chairman was either unwilling or unable to control the proceedings. At the outset, serious concerns were raised by my Counsel Ms Laura Cox QC regarding the integrity of a number of the Respondents statements which remained unsigned and in some cases, reportedly unsupported by the alleged authors. The Chairman remained unconcerned by this. Despite a 74 page statement in which I described in detail the abuse to which I had been subjected, the Chairman had no questions to ask me about my allegations, preferring instead to engage in friendly banter with the Respondents Counsel.

I was subjected to a cross-examination of the most intrusive kind for almost 2 days. . . . My perceptions of criminality with regards to my sexual orientation were considered and most distressingly, the parenting skills of my mother and father were ridiculed. . . . The Chairman made no atempt to moderate this approach . . . appeared uncertain about a number of legal points and relied upon the Respondent's Counsel for guidance. Each day of the hearing, the Respondents produced a large crowd of employees who had been given paid leave to attend, and whose sniggers and stage whispers became increasingly intimidatory both for myself and for those persons acting as witnesses for myself. The Chairman was either unwilling or unable to moderate

[Mr. Chaytor]

this. More importantly, his behaviour was causal in permitting an atmosphere of mockery and ridicule to develop. ... The atmosphere became so intolerable that one gay witness attempted suicide."

Rather than relying solely on Dr. Priestley's statement, I shall bring to bear another witness's description of the events at the tribunal, who stated:

"The witnesses for the respondents ... turned up en masse on a daily basis. Their presence was enormously menacing and they seemed all but equipped with baseball bats to ensure that they could inflict as much damage as possible. Nick's witnesses expressed feelings of being intimidated by antagonistic and undermining utterances made by the respondents' side, with the legal forum offering no solace. ... The Chairman seemingly colluded with the respondents, and I must say that as the hearing continued it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between his role and that of the Barrister for the respondents.

Whilst there is no clear law to protect people from discrimination relating to their sexual orientation, such disgraceful and unashamed treatment of lesbians and gay men will continue to be permitted."

Two issues relating to this sad story require attention. The first concerns the employer's responsibilities. There is currently no legal protection for gay or lesbian employees against discrimination on the ground of their sexuality. If Dr. Priestley had been a woman, had had a disability of some kind or had been a member of an ethnic minority, he would have had recourse to the law earlier.

Although many public employers now have policies on equality of opportunity that refer to sexuality, most private employers do not. For the record, I pay tribute to a small number of private employers who have taken the lead on the issue of discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation. They include Abbey National, Barclays bank, Boots, British Airways, British Gas, British Telecom, Cadbury Schweppes, Glaxo Wellcome, Granada Media Group, Halifax plc, Littlewoods, Lloyds, Marks and Spencer, Midland bank, Northern Foods, Rank Xerox, Rover Group, Sainsbury's supermarkets, Shell, SmithKline Beecham, Unilever and W. H. Smith. There are about 20 such employers. They are all large and, in most cases, multinational, and obviously represent only a tiny minority of the country's employers. There is clearly a case for building discrimination on the ground of sexuality into anti-discrimination legislation.

The second issue is procedure at tribunals. I hope that I have given a flavour of a particularly horrific and shambolic tribunal. Its outcome was that Dr. Priestley's QC—after challenging the chairman's objectivity on several points and finding herself unable to win those arguments—advised Dr. Priestley to withdraw from the tribunal because she did not believe that he would get a fair hearing. That raises the question of the procedure for selecting employment tribunal chairs, the rights of appellants to veto chairs, the training of chairs—especially in equal opportunities policies—and the monitoring of chairs' performance.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister tell us when the Government will be able to build protection for people on the ground of their sexuality into anti-discrimination legislation? Until that happens, what other steps can be taken to prevent such incidents from occurring again?

I know that employment tribunals are the responsibility of the Lord Chancellor rather than my hon. Friend the Minister, but what will happen as a result of the Lord Chancellor's investigation into the conduct of this tribunal and its chairman? I know that that investigation is taking place, because I have written directly to the Lord Chancellor, as have Dr. Priestley and other people.

I thank the Minister for listening patiently to the case that I have outlined, and look forward to her reply.

4.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): This is a very sad and difficult case. One must have sympathy for anyone who is harassed at work. Harassment or bullying, whether on the basis of race, gender, disability, age or sexual orientation, is pernicious. It can put the emotional well-being and health of the worker at risk. Bullying can lead to disaffection or illness, as this case indicates, and can blight a worker's career or entire life. It should have no place in any workplace.

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service recently published a welcome and helpful leaflet, which describes bullying as offensive, intimidating and malicious, and states that its intention is to

"undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient."

The leaflet defines harassment as

"unwanted conduct affecting the dignity of men and women in the workplace. It may be related to age, sex, race, disability, religion, nationality or any personal characteristic of the individual, and may be persistent or an isolated incident. The key is that the actions or comments are viewed as demeaning and unacceptable to the recipient."

Such behaviour is contemptible and unacceptable. There is no excuse for harassing, insulting or isolating any person on the ground of their sexual orientation. Sexual orientation should not be an issue in a modern society. Sadly, however, it remains so in the workplace, the media and more widely in society.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said, a growing number of employers are adopting the code of practice on harassment as part of their equal opportunities policies. In those workplaces, harassment on the ground of sexual orientation would be forbidden.

Sexual harassment is not named in the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, but it was long ago found in case law to be a detriment experienced on grounds of sex. Even in the current framework, someone who feels that they have been bullied or harassed has recourse to both civil and criminal redress. The Employment Rights Act 1996 gives someone the right not to be unfairly dismissed and harassment can be grounds for a claim of constructive or unfair dismissal. Civil action can also be taken under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 when it can be shown that harassment presents a risk to a worker's health. Criminal proceedings can be taken under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which created the criminal offence of intentional harassment, whether in the workplace or elsewhere, and under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, which created another criminal offence of harassment as well as giving a right to damages. Thus, where harassment causes extreme distress to the individual involved, redress is possible in the current framework.

Dr. Priestley, who exercised his rights under the Employment Rights Act 1996, is one of many who has used the tribunal system to exercise their individual rights and, by doing so, influence future employment practices. Last year, some 105,000 cases were completed through the tribunal system. Although that might sound like an indictment of Britain's industrial relations, I prefer to see it as evidence of the right of individuals to ensure fair treatment at work and to seek redress where appropriate. I am well aware of the importance of the publicity that tribunals often receive in the media. It is a helpful incentive and reminder to employers of the need to keep within the law and provide decent working conditions for their employees.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North will understand that I cannot comment on an individual case. It is a dispute between two litigants to which the Government are not party and it is not right for us to give a view or to appear to judge for or against any party in a private dispute. As my hon. Friend recognises, the way in which tribunals and the courts operate is a matter for the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Department of Trade and Industry, but not for the Department for Education and Employment. However, I can say that the Government fully expect every court user to be treated fairly and with courtesy.

I can also confirm that the Lord Chancellor himself, together with his officials, has gone into Dr. Priestley's case thoroughly. I understand that a reply is imminent, although I can give no indication of what it will say. The Lord Chancellor has the power to investigate the personal conduct of tribunal chairmen, but not even he can require chairmen to justify their actions during hearings or intervene in the decisions that they reach.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North and other hon. Members have shown an interest in the appointment of employment tribunal members. Employment tribunals are independent judicial bodies. The chairmen are legally qualified and appointed by the Lord Chancellor, while lay members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The Government regard it as extremely important to ensure that the appointments procedure is free from discrimination, overt or otherwise. As with all public appointments, the Government insist that the selection of tribunal members is based on merit.

While recruiting new lay members recently, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry took the opportunity to undertake the first nationwide recruitment competition open to members of the public. He consulted widely with the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation to ensure that the selection criteria were fair and unbiased. The competition has been a tremendous success. I am pleased to say that, in addition to the high quality of the recruits, 54 per cent. are women, 18 per cent. come from ethnic minorities and 18 per cent. have some form of disability.

The Lord Chancellor appoints new, legally qualified, part-time chairmen, again following an open advertisement, application and interview. Successful candidates are required to show that they have integrity, fairness, an understanding of people and society, maturity, sound temperament, courtesy and humanity. Prejudice or overt bias of any kind would generally mark a candidate as unsuitable and anything of that nature is rigorously followed up by the interviewing panel. Full-time employment tribunal chairmen are usually appointed from those who have served on a part-time basis. Again, vacancies are filled after application and competitive interview.

Chairmen receive extensive training on appointment and then at regular intervals, including training in discrimination issues. Training is overseen by a panel chaired by the President of Employment Tribunals. The conduct of tribunal chairmen and women and the way in which judicial decisions are made are a matter for the President of Employment Tribunals.

We are taking action across government to tackle the discrimination faced by gay and lesbian people in our society. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North will know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary intends to reintroduce legislation to equalise the age of consent. The Home Office is also conducting a comprehensive review of sex offences and penalties. One of its terms of reference is that all new offences must be compatible with the European convention on human rights—as enacted by the Human Rights Act 1998—to ensure that they are fair and non-discriminatory.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is taking forward the repeal of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988.

My hon. Friend will also know of the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights which found that the policy of the Ministry of Defence—that homosexuality is not compatible with service life—was unsustainable. The Chief of the Defence Staff has commissioned an urgent review of the policy on homosexuality, the aim of which is to sustain operational effectiveness within the law.

The Equal Opportunities Commission has been commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment to work with us and a steering group of stakeholders to produce a non-statutory code of practice preventing discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation. It will be similar to the non-statutory code of practice on age diversity that we have also brought in.

The new code of practice will also cover a wide range of other behaviour that makes life unequal and uncomfortable for gay men and lesbians, including inadvertently hurtful, as well as deliberate, behaviour. I know that the Equal Opportunities Commission will fully consult all stakeholders and community groups to ensure that the code addresses issues with a negative impact on gay men and lesbians in the workplace. We want to ensure that employers understand that discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation is not acceptable and that they are clear about the steps that they can take to avoid it. We believe that the new code can have a significant impact after the good work of the EOC in introducing it. The EOC has a long and proud record of helping individuals and advising employers. The effect of the code will of course be assessed and the Government will then review the need for legislation in the light of code's evaluation and developments in other areas.

[Ms Margaret Hodge]

There are two reasons why my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North wanted this debate. First he was concerned that anyone should suffer harassment and distress because of prejudice at work. I share that concern and regret that it should ever happen. It is unacceptable for any employer to allow staff to behave in that way.

My hon. Friend's other reason was to express his concern at the handling of the dispute by the authorities. As I said, that is a much more difficult issue for me to address. I hope, however, that I have reassured him that the Government take seriously the need to ensure fairness and equal treatment in our tribunals. It is clear that existing legislation allows individuals who have been harassed on grounds of their sexual orientation to bring claims for constructive dismissal. Sexual orientation is not one of the categories of dismissal that the Employment Rights Act 1996 regards as fair.

British Stasi Agents

5 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) *rose—*

Several hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Dr. Lewis: I am grateful to my hon. Friends for their support, especially my hon. Friends the Members for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) and for Witney—I am sorry, I mean my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney). Hon. Members will appreciate that relevant but subliminal reference.

This debate is about the Stasi archive, not the Mitrokhin-KGB archive. It is about Berlin files, not about Moscow files. It is about original documents, not about handwritten notes. Some might think it a coincidence that, only 24 hours earlier, the Government thought it necessary to rush out by means of a planted written question the news that those who have been exposed by the Mitrokhin archive and the Berlin Stasi files will not be prosecuted, but I do not think so. Whether or not that is a coincidence, it enables me to speak more openly about individual cases than I might have been able to do if a trial had been pending.

I shall not say much about Melita Norwood, because she was discovered in the Mitrokhin archive. However, it is amusing to observe that that lady, who gave away to Soviet tyranny secrets of the British atomic bomb, is often pictured wearing a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament badge—showing her desire that, although the Soviet Union should have had the bomb, this country and its democracy should have given it up unilaterally.

On 21 October 1999, in his statement on the Mitrokhin archive, the Home Secretary referred to the handwritten notes taken by Mr. Mitrokhin that the Secret Intelligence Service smuggled out of Russia. Because those notes were handwritten, they were, as he said,

"of no direct evidential value".

My first concern is that he conflated those notes with the original archive that has identified other would-be and actual spies—the archive in Berlin. There is no doubt that the material held in Berlin is of evidential value. It is original material and includes the reports given by agents themselves and by their handlers directly.

The Home Secretary said that it "would be wholly improper" to denounce

"people against whom allegations had been made, without evidence being put before a court of law,"—[*Official Report*, 21 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 587-90.]

He said that it would be improper to denounce such people if they had not been convicted. However, the question at the heart of this debate is whether it is a criminal offence to co-operate in times of peace with hostile intelligence agencies belonging to a democracy's potential enemies.

There is no doubt that it is a criminal offence to give aid and comfort to the enemy in time of war. However, I hope that the Minister will tell us whether the Government accept that it is a criminal offence for someone actively to co-operate with the hostile intelligence service of a potential enemy, or whether they say that that is not something for which someone can be

prosecuted. If the former is the answer, those people certainly should be prosecuted, and it is a disgrace that they are not being prosecuted. If it is the latter, the Government cannot have it both ways. If such an action is not a crime, it is clearly wrong to say that the activities of those people should not be exposed to public opprobrium unless and until they have been convicted in a court of law.

The Berlin Stasi archive is housed near the Alexanderplatz. It is called the Archive for the Files of the State Security Service of the German Democratic Republic. The Stasi headquarters had previously been in Normannenstrasse. So far as I have been able to find out, there are only two records of visits by British officials. In 1990, two British intelligence officers visited the Stasi headquarters and took the time to photograph each other sitting on the toilet of Erich Mielke, but they did not bother to look at the documents. A few years later, a bus load of British officials visited the former Stasi headquarters for a Christmas outing.

It appears that the only real work that has been done on the files was by a journalist, Jamie Dettmer, in the early 1990s, and by the academic, Dr. Anthony Glees, in conjunction with the BBC earlier this year. That work contributed to four BBC 2 programmes that were broadcast between 19 September and 10 October this year, which brought to public attention the activities of, among others, Dr. Robin Pearson, Miss Fiona Houlding and Professor Vic Allen. It is interesting to note that although we were told that five cases were being considered for prosecution, the Government have not revealed whom two of the five cases concern. Is Miss Houlding or Professor Allen involved? We know that one case involves Dr. Pearson.

I first raised the fact that no one from the Security Service, the Crown Prosecution Service or the police had been in contact with Dr. Glees—the man who discovered the original material—with the Leader of the House on 28 October and then with the Home Secretary on 6 December. I confirm, yet again, that no one in authority has consulted the man who discovered the primary evidence of Dr. Pearson's activities. That is cause for concern.

However, on 6 December, the Home Secretary said:

"I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the records have revealed many leads in cases involving the investigation of more than 100 individuals."—[*Official Report*, 6 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 555.]

I am puzzled by that statement. Unless the Home Secretary was again conflating the Mitrokhin archive, with its huge number of leads, with the Berlin Stasi archive, which does not appear to have been properly visited by members of the British security services, it is hard to understand how such an extensive investigation could be under way.

It is true that, as a result of Operation Rosewood in the United States, a copy of those KGB editions of Stasi files that were sent to Moscow exists. The American Central Intelligence Agency purchased those files from the Russians at the end of the cold war. However, there is no reason to suppose that the material in them covers anything like all the material in Berlin, so what has been going on? How can a proper investigation be occurring if the Berlin archive has yet to be trawled properly?

I shall spend a few moments on the material that has been found in the Berlin archive to give an idea of what we are contending with. I shall quote some extracts from the file on Dr. Robin Pearson. There is a note on 25 August 1978 stating that Armin—the code name for Dr. Pearson—was given

"DM500 on his departure as expenses for his work in Edinburgh for the security office".

As a result of a meeting held on 28 to 30 March 1980 with Dr. Pearson in Budapest, there is a note stating that he

"is to be given . . . secret ink for handwriting."

The notes continues:

"He is to be asked whether he possesses the necessary technical skills for one-way radio transmission to which he will be introduced later. He is to be given DM500."

That is additional to the money mentioned in the first note that I quoted.

On 22 September 1980, there is a note on the file which reports the results of Dr. Pearson's spying on others—he is a university lecturer. It states:

"YYY has finished studies and stay in Leipzig; meant to get a post at MoD or NATO, but failed security check. Her teachers and father were questioned. Questions too about alcohol and the nature of her relationship with her boyfriend. YYY was one of the students at Leipzig at the same time as A"—

A, of course, is Dr. Pearson—

"Her boyfriend had been at Leipzig wih A and had developed a relationship with a Russian girl who was now keen to move to the UK. A passes on two surnames of fellow students; one had been vetted for six months. A says there is a crisis in the relationship between the two. . . . A has given information about students of whom one is an intermediary with the British Embassy Berlin, one an MoD translator, one at the MoD vetted for six months and on Chinese studies at Leeds."

As a result of a meeting in the German Democratic Republic with his controller from 9 to 17 August 1982, it is noted on Dr. Pearson's file that the transmission of radio signals should begin that year or, if necessary, in January 1983. As a result of a meeting in Paris with his controller from 12 to 13 March 1981, the note on his file states:

"The most effective goal would be an operation against NATO headquarters predicated upon a post in Brussels, for example the EEC, or in Paris or the Federal Republic. The minimum goal is work in London against the Ministry of Defence."

Finally, as a result of a meeting as late as 23 to 29 August 1987, there is a note of a meeting on those dates which states:

"A declared himself ready to look for students at York university who were operationally interesting and might be won over for us. We have his agreement to use his flat, his address and his telephone to support our Kundschafters."—

Kundschafters are deep penetration agents—

"A is ready if we need him to serve as the representative of a British flag."—

That is when someone pretends to be the representative of a friendly intelligence service to get information that can then be passed on to a hostile intelligence service. The note continues:

"It has been agreed to retain contact with him via Gerd who as instructor will come into the operation."

There is much more of that kind, but time does not permit me to go into it.

I conclude by asking some questions, of which I would like to have given the Minister advance notice. When I heard that I had secured the debate, I asked my office to ring the Minister's office to ask whether he would like

[Dr. Lewis]

time to receive notice of my questions. I did not have the courtesy of a response; I renewed the invitation today, but that invitation has similarly not been responded to. That is a pity; it means that the Minister will read a prepared speech, but in so far as he has flexibility and information at his disposal, I hope that he will respond to the following points.

First, is it a crime to collaborate with a hostile intelligence agency in peacetime; to try to recruit agents among students who could then go on to be in sensitive positions; to be a deep penetration agent oneself—it is clear from the files that both Fiona Houlding and Robin Pearson actively agreed to do that—and to spy on one's colleagues, especially those who might then be travelling at that time to central and eastern Europe and thus to put them in harm's way, which the files bring out clearly in the case of Dr. Pearson? Is that a crime? If it is a crime, why are those people not being prosecuted? If it is not a crime, why are they not being denounced? The excuse of having to wait for them to be convicted in a court clearly would not apply.

Secondly, who are the other two who have now been let off in time for Christmas? Thirdly, why has there been no contact with Dr. Glees, the man who is best able to brief the security services about the material that he found and for whom they should have looked much earlier? Fourthly, why does there appear to have been no proper visit to the Berlin archive by the appropriate authorities to investigate what material is available?

Fifthly, how could a prominent Stalinist such as Professor Vic Allen get away with meeting a succession of Stasi controllers in London, when everyone knew that he was a prime candidate to engage in such activity? I take little pride in pointing out that I drew attention to Professor Allen's record and proclivities in a letter published in *The Times* in mid-1985. He had a record as long as your arm for subversive affiliations and activities, both in this country and previously in Nigeria.

Finally, what about the 100 leads from the Berlin archive who are supposedly still being investigated? Are they still being investigated—or have 105 people been amnestised for Christmas, rather than just five?

In conclusion, if the Home Secretary and his team spent a little less time posing in pubs with Conservative defectors and a little more time tracking traitors and uncovering them, this country could have more confidence that those who seek to betray it will be shamed, exposed and, if appropriate, prosecuted.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) chastises us for posing in pubs with too many Conservative defectors. If there had not been so many of them in recent years, we would not have had to spend so much time doing that. We give them a friendly welcome; many others will no doubt wish to join us in due course.

The subject of the debate is most important. I welcome the opportunity provided by the hon. Member for New Forest, East to consider these issues. It allows me to focus on some of the events of the cold war period and to highlight action that our security services have taken to counter the threat from certain foreign intelligence organisations during and after the cold war.

The hon. Gentleman referred to his telephone calls to my office. I am not sure what time he contacted the Home Secretary's office, but I became aware of his call to my office at 4.15 pm today; I was reading papers at the time and it was not possible or convenient for me to contact him. I am perfectly happy, therefore, to consider the points that he made to me and, in due course, to reply to him in writing. I hope that that is helpful.

Dr. Julian Lewis: That is very helpful. The Minister is right to say that my telephone call was a last-minute, second attempt at a response, but the original approach to the Home Secretary's office was made last Friday, when there was plenty of time.

Mr. O'Brien: When I received the message, I was looking at the briefing papers for the debate. However, I am sure that we will be able to deal with the point made by the hon. Gentleman.

It is clearly an offence to commit acts of espionage that damage Britain's economic and security interests. Quite what behaviour will fulfil the conditions necessary—the mens rea and actus reus of an offence of that sort—will be a matter of law, which will need to be considered by the prosecuting authority. If the hon. Gentleman wishes, I can set out for him what the requirements are, but it is necessary to consider the facts of an individual case and reach a conclusion based on them.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the announcement made yesterday. He rightly drew a distinction between the Mitrokhin archives—they were, as he said, second-hand but important information, and perhaps of different evidential value—and other information that may be available from the Stasi or other sources. The Government accept that distinction. Of the individuals mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, at least one was named as a result of information from the Mitrokhin archive and at least one other—and perhaps more—from the Stasi archive.

The Solictior-General has stated that the prosecuting authorities have reached a conclusion on the five cases. He has decided not to refer any of them to the police for further investigation, mainly because what is known is already enough to make it clear that any prosecution would fail. That view was reached by the Crown Prosecution Service initially and then confirmed by the Law Officers. It is right to say that publicly.

The House will know that the Solicitor-General's step was unusual. Generally speaking, the prosecuting authorities do not make announcements about consideration of individual cases or name people publicly as a result of an investigation of someone's background. If a decision is taken to prosecute, the law takes its course and it is normally wrong to draw attention to individuals when decions have been taken not to prosecute. However, in this particular case, there is a legitimate public interest in security matters and the allegations have been given wide publicity. We therefore decided to end speculation about whether the case against them will continue to be considered. A decision has been reached, as I said, and we have explained why we took it.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East mentioned that more than 100 people could be investigated and asked whether we were going to conflate the Stasi material and the Mitrokhin material. We cannot comment on the steps taken by the intelligence and security services in pursuit of their inquiries. I can tell him that various steps have been taken and that we are satisfied that the security services are investigating what it is proper for them to investigate.

The publication of the Mitrokhin archive and the East German Stasi records has led to pressure to reveal the names of those against whom allegations of spying for, or assisting, the KGB or the Stasi have been made. It would be wrong to compromise the effectiveness of the security and intelligence services by revealing the cases that they may be working on. Above and beyond that, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said in a statement to the House on 21 October,

"it is a long established rule of law that people are innocent until convicted in a court of law."—[*Official Report*, 21 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 589.]

It is wrong to slide into trial by denunciation by feeding or encouraging rumour or speculation.

Dr. Lewis: We have now heard that statement when I quoted it and again when the Minister quoted it. If it is not a criminal offence to do the things that those people did, does the Minister accept that the public has the right to know when they did them, when they are clearly guilty of having done them—even though it may not be a criminal offence? That is the nub of the issue.

Mr. O'Brien: Whether it is a criminal offence depends not just on law but on evidence and hence whether the evidential rules will allow the submission of certain types of information in a trial. Making allegations about what might, if there were sufficient evidence, be criminal offences could amount to denouncing a person as guilty of committing a criminal offence. The suggestion is that the person is guilty, but is not convicted because of a lack of evidence.

We tread a fine line here and we must be careful. It is wrong to criticise, as some unfortunately have, the Crown Prosecution Service for reaching a feeble decision. It was not. The Law Officers reviewed and confirmed it, so that allegation is a cheap approach to politics. I do not accuse the hon. Member for New Forest, East because he did not say that during his speech, but others have. It is wrong for politicians to second-guess the decisions of senior prosecutors and the Law Officers. I do not believe in taking political decisions to prosecute. We are in the business, as were those who sacrificed their careers and sometimes their lives, such as Mitrokhin, of ensuring proper democratic and legal safeguards and the promotion of human rights. That does not mean engaging in denunciations, making political judgments or Star Chamber prosecutions just because it would look good in tomorrow's headlines. It is wrong for politicians to accuse someone of a criminal offence. The Government prefer a more careful and proper approach to such matters and support the proper judicial authorities in taking legitimate decisions.

I am not going to say more about individual cases, but I can say that the Security Service investigates matters of national security, including allegations and suspicions of spying. It does so under a statutory duty placed on them by the Security Services Act 1989. The Security Service concentrates on investigations of any link that might identify spies who are providing other countries with information that might be damaging to Britain's national security or economic well-being. The Security Service also seeks to frustrate the activities of any foreign intelligence agents who might try to recruit people in this country who could provide access to British secrets.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East claims that the records of the East German intelligence services have not been properly investigated and asked what action the Government had taken regarding former Stasi agents revealed in those records. As I have said, it would be wrong to go into detail about how the security services go about their business. To do so would damage their effectiveness in a vital area of Britain's national interest. It has been the policy of successive Administrations not to comment on such matters. The Government intend the Security Service to do its business in a professional and dedicated manner. We have no reason to believe that it has not done so in these cases.

As the Home Secretary said to the House on 6 December in replying to one of the hon. Gentleman's questions, the East German records reveal many leads, which may have to be followed up. The fact that a name appears in East German intelligence records is not, of itself, proof of any wrongdoing—far from it. The East Germans took a keen interest in many people who firmly opposed their regime, as well as those who might have assisted it. They even took an interest in innocent citizens whom they may perchance have encountered.

We should remember the background to the creation of the records. The East German regime oppressed its own citizens and its intelligence services were part of the process of repression. The intelligence services kept records on large numbers of citizens and their contacts. They also kept records on the contacts of those who were interested in their country, on foreigners visiting East Germany, on names reported by their agents as visiting or having contacts abroad. The resulting collection of records was massive and many people named in them are completely innocent. Individuals may have been completely unaware that they had been named. That is why such careful examinations and investigations are necessary.

As I said, the hon. Member for New Forest, East should approach these matters with great care. He mentioned Dr. Glees. If he has relevant evidence, he should urgently contact the Director-General of the Security Service so that the material can be examined. Some countries still seek to gain advantage in economics, politics, and military affairs by the use of covert activity against the United Kingdom. The Security Service remains vigilant to counter any such activity.

It being half-past five o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the sitting, without Question put.*

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 13 December 1999

HOME DEPARTMENT

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what has been spent by his Department on external consultants and advisers since May 1997 funded from (i) his Department's programme provision and (ii) his Department's running costs; [99486]

(2) how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102097]

Mr. Straw: I am sorry that I am unable to provide this information at present. I will write to the hon. Member as soon as it is available and place a copy of the letter in the Library.

Integrated Casework Directive

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library details of the performance of the Integrated Casework Directorate against its four key performance indicators for each week since those performance indicators were first applied. [101491]

Mrs. Roche: The four key indicators are those against which it was agreed that the recovery of the Integrated Casework Directorate's (ICD) business would be measured in the first instance. I have put in the Library a chart giving a breakdown of the weekly output in these four categories since January 1999. The categories are: general and settlement casework; asylum first decisions; asylum appeals dispatched to the Immigration Appellate Authority; and European casework. The chart shows that cumulatively the ICD first exceeded the target on week ending 22 May, and has consistently done so since 10 September.

Public Interest Defence

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the consistency between the absence in UK law of a public interest defence to breaches of the Official Secrets Act 1911 and *(a)* the UK's membership of the Council of Europe and *(b)* the UK's human rights obligations. [101390]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* I am advised that the absence of a public interest defence act in the Official Secrets Act 1911 is compatible with the United Kingdom's international obligations.

Prisons (Religious Advisers)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many religious advisers are employed to work within the Prison Service; and what is the cost of their salaries. [101627]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service obtains advice on religious matters from a range of sources including the Prison Service Chaplaincy, visiting ministers and the advisory group on religion in prisons. It employs one religious adviser. The salary for this post is within the Prison Service grade 7 range of £29,152-£45,984 and the post attracts £1,842 Inner London Weighting.

Fire Authorities

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which fire authorities retain day staffing. [101895]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The fire authorities in England and Wales which have day-crewed fire stations are:

Avon
Bedfordshire and Luton
Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
Cheshire
Cornwall
Derbyshire
Devon
Dorset
East Sussex
Essex
Gloucestershire
Greater Manchester
Hampshire
Hereford and Worcester
Hertfordshire
Isles of Scilly
Kent and the Medway Towns
Lancashire
Lincolnshire
Norfolk
North Yorkshire
Northamptonshire
Northumberland
Oxfordshire
Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire
Suffolk
Warwickshire
West Sussex
West Yorkshire
Wiltshire
Mid and West Wales
North Wales
South Wales.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many section 19 applications arising from the Fire Services Act 1947 have been submitted from each fire authority since 1994; how many have been refused; and what was the basis for each refusal. [101894]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of section 19 applications submitted since 1 January 1994 (excluding some which were later withdrawn by the fire authority)

was 259. One application was refused and one refused in part. Eight applications are still outstanding. These details with a breakdown of the applications by authority are:

Fire authorities	*Total*
Avon	1
Bedfordshire and Luton	1
Berkshire	4
Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes	1
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	2
Cheshire	10
Cleveland	3
Cornwall	3
Cumbria[1]	6
Derbyshire	5
Devon	5
Dorset	7
Durham and Darlington[1]	4
East Sussex	3
Essex	3
Gloucestershire	2
Greater Manchester	4
Hampshire	9
Hereford and Worcester	3
Hertfordshire	3
Humberside	3
Isle of Wight	1
Isles of Scilly	0
Kent and the Medway Towns	6
Lancashire[1]	10
Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland[1]	1
Lincolnshire	2
London[2]	15
Merseyside	6
Norfolk	3
Northamptonshire	0
Northumberland	4
North Yorkshire	5
Nottinghamshire and the City of Nottingham	9
Oxfordshire[1]	5
Shropshire and the Wrekin	7
Somerset	4
South Yorkshire	7
Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire	6
Suffolk	6
Surrey	6
Tyne and Wear	8
Warwickshire	10
West Midlands[1]	11
West Sussex[3]	4
West Yorkshire[1]	11
Wiltshire and Swindon	9
Mid and West Wales[4]	3
North Wales[5]	8
South Wales[6]	10

[1] One application still under consideration; two in the case of West Yorkshire.

[2] One application mostly approved, but a proposal to remove one appliance and 24 posts refused on the grounds that the Home Secretary was not satisfied that the Authority had given adequate consideration to representations that had been made about arrangements for dealing with special fire risks.

[3] Application to remove nine posts refused on the grounds that there were insufficient retained firefighters at the fire station in question for the Home Secretary to be satisfied that the Authority would be able to maintain the national standards of fire cover.

[4] Pre 1 April 1996 Powys, West Glamorgan, Dyfed.

[5] Pre 1 April 1996 Clwyd, Gwynned.

[6] Pre 1 April 1996 Mid Glamorgan, South Glamorgan, Gwent.

Young Offenders (Custody)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children below the ages of *(a)* 15 and *(b)* 18 years have been held in custody in each of the last five years. [102036]

Mr. Boateng: Information on the number of receptions into Prison Service establishments in England and Wales of persons aged 15–17 between 1994 and 1998 is given in the table. This information is also published in successive volumes of "Prison statistics England and Wales" (Table 3.10 of the 1998 edition, column 4430) copies of which are in the Library. In addition, 107 Secure Training Orders were made between 1 March 1998, the implementation date, and 31 December 1998. Such persons would, at that time, have been accommodated in either a Secure Training Centre or in local authority secure accommodation.

Information on the population of persons aged less than 15 years in local authority secure accommodation is published in a Department of Health statistical bulletin entitled "Children Accommodated in Secure Units". This information is presented on a financial year basis with the last report (Bulletin 1999–6) covering the year ending 31 March 1998.

Receptions[1] into prisons in England and Wales of 15–17 year olds by type of custody 1994–98

Year	*Remand*	*Sentenced*
1998	6,482	5,585
1997	6,625	5,617
1996	6,513	5,285
1995	5,960	4,671
1994	5,716	4,120

[1] Total receptions cannot be calculated by adding together receptions in each category because there is double counting. However, double counting has been allowed for in the figures of receptions of prisoners under remand where the figures for 'remand' record only once a person received as an untried prisoner who is subsequently received also as a convicted unsentenced prisoner.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children below the ages of *(a)* 15 and *(b)* 18 years are currently serving custodial sentences. [102037]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available provisional information is for 31 October 1999 and shows that there were 1,770 sentenced persons aged 15–17 in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales on that date. In addition, a further 99 sentenced 12–14 year olds were held in Secure Training Centres with a further two persons being placed in local authority units in England and Wales.

Information on the population of persons aged 15–17 years in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales is published in "Prison statistics England and Wales" (Table 3.2 of the 1998 edition, column 4430) a copy of which is in the Library.

Information on the population of persons aged less than 15 years in local authority accommodation is published in a Department of Health statistical bulletin entitled "Children Accommodated in Secure Units". This

information is presented on a financial year basis with the last report (Bulletin 1999–6) covering the year ending 31 March 1998.

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the outcome of the Justice and Home Affairs Council held in Brussels on 2 and 3 December; and if he will make a statement. [102095]

Mr. Straw: The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), and I represented the United Kingdom at the Council. The main matters dealt with were as follows:

"A" points

The Council agreed as an "A" point, among other things, the draft Council Conclusions on the implementation of measures to combat child sex tourism.

Follow-up to the Tampere Council

The European Commission presented its proposals for a "scoreboard" to monitor the implementation of the conclusions of the Tampere Special European Council and commitments arising from the Treaty of Amsterdam.

Draft Mutual Legal Assistance Convention

Good progress was made on the negotiation of this important instrument and a number of Member States were able to lift their reservations.

Counterfeiting the Euro

The Council agreed the substance of the proposed Framework Decision subject to a small number of, mainly procedural, reservations.

Draft Insolvency Regulation

All aspects of this draft instrument were agreed, except for the question of territorial application on which discussions are continuing.

Draft Service of Documents Regulation

The Council agreed the text of the proposed Regulation subject to a United Kingdom Parliamentary scrutiny reservation and reserves relating to the instrument's scope.

Draft Directive on Electronic Commerce

The Council discussed the criminal law aspects of this draft Directive, the overall objectives of which the United Kingdom fully supports.

Organised Crime

The Council considered progress of work on two draft documents: "Prevention and Control of Organised Crime: A European Strategy for the New Millennium"; and the 1998 European Union "Organised Crime Situation Report".

Draft Eurodac Regulation

The Presidency reported that considerable progress had been made on the draft regulation. It was noted that the European Parliament would need to be re-consulted on the draft instrument and that the United Kingdom maintained a Parliamentary scrutiny reserve.

Commission Proposal on Admission on Family Reunification

The Commission introduced its proposal to give European Union citizens and legally resident third country nationals the right to have non-European Union family members join them. Member States gave a general welcome to the proposal which was remitted to the relevant working group for detailed consideration.

Draft Negotiations mandate on Dublin Parallel Agreement with Norway and Iceland

The Council noted that the negotiating mandate had effectively been agreed, other than as regards the question of its territorial application.

Prisons

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate *(a)* the prison population and *(b)* spending on prisons in the next five years. [101964]

Mr. Boateng: New short-term prison population projections as at October 1999, and revised long-term projections, have been prepared by the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. A summary is in the Library and available in the September prison population brief on the Home Office website at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm.

The projected average population for 1999–2000 and each of the next five years for the central scenario is given in the table.

The budget for the Prison Service was set following the comprehensive spending review. The figures, which incorporate some minor subsequent adjustments are listed in the table. The budget for 2002–03 and 2003–04 will be determined in the next spending review.

Prison population projections 1999–2000 to 2004–05

Year	*Number*
1999–2000	65,300
2000–01	68,100
2001–02	70,100
2002–03	70,800
2003–04	71,300
2004–05	71,900

Prison Service budget 1999–2000 to 2001–05

Year	*£ million*
1999–2000	1,925.280
2000–01	1,981.280
2001–02	2,004.912

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Eccles will receive a reply from the Immigration and Nationality Directorate Board to his letter of 6 July, reference number 915495/99. [101935]

Mrs. Roche: The Immigration and Nationality Directorate replied to my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles on 8 December requesting additional information.

Swords

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the law regarding retail availability of swords and similar weapons, with particular reference to the age limits for intending purchasers. [101937]

Mr. Boateng: It is an offence under section 1 of the Prevention of Crime Act 1999 for any person to have with them an offensive weapon in a public place, including private premises to which the public have access. In addition, the Criminal Justice Act 1988, as amended, prohibits the sale of any knife, knife blade or other article with a blade or which is sharply pointed, to a person under

the age of 16, with the exception of a folding pocket knife with a blade not exceeding three inches and a permanently enclosed razor blade cartridge.

We have no immediate plans to amend this legislation but will keep the matter under review.

Prison Officers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female prison officers were currently suspended from duty for alleged misconduct on 1 December. [102405]

Mr. Boateng: The table shows the number of prison officers suspended for alleged misconduct on 1 December.

Prison officers	*Male*	*Female*
Number suspended	97	11

Prevention of Torture

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when in the last five years the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture has visited the United Kingdom; how many months elapsed between each visit and the publication of the Committee's report; and when he expects the report of the Committee's most recent visit to be published. [102186]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The report of the Committee's third visit to the United Kingdom, in May 1994, was published in March 1996. The report of the Committee's fourth visit, in September 1997, has not yet been published; that is a matter for the Committee. The Committee's fifth visit took place between 30 November and 8 December 1999.

Prisons (Disinfecting Tablets)

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the findings of the pilot project into the provision of disinfecting tablets in prisons to reduce transmission of HIV and hepatitis viruses will be made available. [102206]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service is currently considering a report from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine evaluating the pilot project for the re-introduction, on a trial basis, of disinfecting tablets in 11 prisons in England and Wales. I expect to be able to make an announcement on the results and outcome of the evaluation in the New Year.

Operation Lancet

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of Operation Lancet into the Cleveland Police Force under its recently appointed investigating officer. [102146]

Mr. Boateng: There is nothing I can add at present to the extensive comments made by the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Mr. Clarke), in responding to my hon. Friend in an Adjournment Debate on 10 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1093–95.

Operation Dollar

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will call for a report from the Chief Constable of Cleveland Police on matters concerning Regulation 6 disciplinary notices relating to senior police officers and Operation Dollar; [102196]

(2) if he will meet the Chairman of the Cleveland Police Authority to discuss matters concerning Regulation 6 disciplinary notices relating to senior police officers and Operation Dollar. [102197]

Mr. Boateng: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 392W.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of Operation Dollar into the Cleveland Police Force, indicating the person responsible as the investigating officer of the operation. [102147]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Mr. Lloyd Clarke, Deputy Chief Constable of the West Yorkshire Police, is the Investigating Officer for Operation Lancet and for Operation Dollar, which is linked to Lancet. Both operations are currently on-going.

Convention on Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what training is being given to *(a)* the police service and *(b)* the Prison Service on the implications for their work of the incorporation of the Convention on Human Rights into United Kingdom law. [101979]

Mr. Boateng: Training in Human Rights issues is already included in a number of courses provided by National Police Training (NPT) including the Probationer Training Programme, when recruits to the police service are made aware of the extent and limitations of their powers as police officers. Human rights issues are also covered in the Strategic Command Course and the Accelerated Promotion Course which are delivered by NPT at Bramshill, and NPT have also held executive seminars for senior officers at Bramshill.

The majority of police training (about 87 per cent.) is delivered in forces. NPT is working with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) on an audit of ACPO policy which may identify service-wide training needs. Work is almost complete on the development of a Human Rights competency framework and further work is under way on the identification of the generic and role specific training needs of officers up to inspector. All NPT courses will be reviewed to ensure that Human Rights awareness is incorporated. Role specific training will focus on those roles, such as that of Custody Officer, which are most likely to be exposed to Human Rights issues.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will estimate how many people claiming political asylum arrived in the United

Kingdom in each of the last five years for which figures are available; [102210]

(2) how many people were *(a)* accepted and *(b)* rejected for political asylum in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [102209]

Mrs. Roche: Information on persons applying for asylum on or after entry to the United Kingdom is given in the table. Information on the number of asylum applications and decisions received in 1999 can be found on the Home Office internet site at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm.

Applications received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions, 1994 to 1998 [1]

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998* [2]
Applications	32,830	43,965	29,640	32,500	46,015
Total decisions	20,990	27,005	38,960	36,045	31,570
Recognised as a refugee and granted asylum	825	1,295	2,240	3,985	5,345
Not recognised as a refugee but granted exceptional leave	3,660	4,410	5,055	3,115	3,910
Refused asylum and exceptional leave	16,500	21,300	31,670	28,945	22,315

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five
[2] Provisional

Electoral Costs

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the cost of a person voting by post at a *(a)* parliamentary and *(b)* local government election. [102543]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In England, Wales and Scotland *(a)* for parliamentary elections, no separate records of the administrative costs of processing postal votes are kept; and *(b)* local authorities are responsible for the cost of conducting local government elections and this information is not collected centrally.

In Northern Ireland the cost for a person voting by post is estimated to be £1.27 both for parliamentary and local elections.

2 Marsham Street

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 391W, on 2 Marsham Street, if he intends to maintain the current rate of expenditure in 2000. [102193]

Mr. Straw: A large proportion of the costs are for reactive maintenance rather than routine preventive maintenance. This makes it difficult to finalise a firm budget until part-way through the year. However, at present, we anticipate that next year's cost will not exceed the current budgeted cost for the year ending 31 March 2000.

Hemp Seed

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning the proposal for a Council regulation amending Reg(EC) No. 1251/99 on the use of hemp seed. [102496]

Mr. Boateng: Representations regarding the application of Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 licensing controls under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 have been received from Hemcore Ltd. and the National Farmers Union. I also understand that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department in the lead for Regulation (EC) No. 1251/99, is considering representations from the Hemp Food Industries Association and others.

Drug-misusing Offenders

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of the money awarded to police forces in England and Wales to fund arrest referral schemes for drug-misusing offenders is to be derived from *(a)* his Department's office budget and *(b)* the overall drugs misuse strategy and UK National Plan budget; how much money this will be; and if he will make a statement; [102567]

(2) what proportion of the money awarded to police forces in England and Wales to fund arrest referral schemes for drug-misusing offenders is in addition to the Government's current total drugs misuse strategy and UK National Plan Budget; and if he will make a statement. [102566]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 14 July, at the Association of Chief Police Officers summer conference, that an extra £20 million was to be made available to police forces to support the spread of arrest referral schemes across all custody suites in England and Wales. This £20 million is part of the Government's Crime Reduction Programme and is in addition to the money that is committed to the delivery of the anti-drugs strategy, Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain.

Police forces, with the support of their local Drug Action Teams, were invited to bid for matched funding to help meet the cost of arrest referral workers and to bid for a contribution to the anticipated costs of providing treatment for drug-misusing offenders picked up by arrest referral schemes. Initial bids were received from 39 forces who are now being asked to prepare more detailed action plans. The initial allocations to the forces concerned, which were announced on 3 December, total of £19.7 million over the period up to March 2002.

Immigration

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reasons underlie the length of time taken by his Department to consider the urgent request to a Minister for permission to visit the UK in the case of the Sengunes family. [102598]

Mrs. Roche: I am sorry it has taken so long to consider the hon. Member's urgent request to consider the Sengunes family's request to be given indefinite leave to

remain in the United Kingdom on compassionate grounds. This is a complicated case which has needed careful consideration. An interim reply was sent on 1 December and I wrote substantively today.

Port of Liverpool Police

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his duties and responsibilities in respect of the Port of Liverpool Police. [101678]

Mr. Hill: I have been asked to reply.

The Port of Liverpool Police were established under the Mersey Docks and Harbour (Police) Order 1975. The provisions of the Order impose no specific duties or responsibilities on the Government.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Military Exports

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials discussed the export of Hawk aircraft to Indonesia with representatives of British Aerospace between 23 August and 16 September, indicating the dates; and if he will make a statement. [100838]

Mr. Byers: There were no discussions in this period between DTI Ministers and British Aerospace regarding the export of Hawk aircraft to Indonesia. As far as DTI officials are concerned, on 15 September the Director of the DTI's Export Control Organisation did ask British Aerospace if the three Hawk aircraft exported from the UK on 31 August under a licence issued by the previous Administration had been delivered to Indonesia.

Motorway Services

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about excessive charges for items for sale at motorway service areas. [100912]

Mr. Byers: I have received a number of letters from MPs on behalf of their constituents and from members of the public about prices at Motorway Service Areas (MSAs).

Those letters have been passed to the Director General of Fair Trading who, under UK competition law, has in the first instance responsibility to investigate allegations of anti-competitive behaviour. The Office of Fair Trading are currently investigating the levels of prices charged at MSAs to determine whether they are the result of anti-competitive practices or exploitation of a monopoly position.

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy in the WTO Millennium Round, to ensure that the principle of sustainable development is respected in international agreements on trade. [101675]

Mr. Caborn: The Government are committed to the principle of sustainable development and to maintaining an open, non-discriminatory and equitable multi-lateral trading system. These aims are regarded as complementary and mutually supportive. We are committed to ensure that sustainable development is a key objective for any new round of trade negotiations.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the *(a)* dates, *(b)* places at which meetings were held and *(c)* purposes of conferences of the World Trade Organisation since its inception and those of the former General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or other conferences relating to its preparations, together with the names of (i) members of the Government and (ii) officials who were present when draft rules were (1) considered and (2) agreed. [101920]

Mr. Caborn: The dates, locations, and main purposes of GATT and WTO Ministerial Conferences and Special Sessions are as follows:

1946 United Nations Economic and Social Council in London establishes a Preparatory Committee to prepare for a United Nations Conference on Trade and Employment for the purpose of promoting the expansion of trade and production, exchange and consumption of goods.

1947 Preparatory Committee in Geneva—tariff negotiations and drafting of the GATT

1947 GATT Conference in Geneva—Signing of the "Final Act" covering tariff reductions and trade rules (GATT Articles);

1948 GATT enters into force. GATT Session in Geneva to incorporate elements of the Havana Charter into the GATT;

1949 GATT Conference in Annecy—tariff reductions;

1951 GATT Special Session in Torquay—tariff reductions;

1956 GATT Conference in Geneva—tariff reductions;

1957 GATT Ministerial in Geneva—tariff reductions and rules;

1959 GATT Ministerial in Tokyo to establish Trade Negotiations Committee for a new Round of negotiations on tariffs (Dillon Round);

1961 GATT Ministerial in Geneva to discuss tariff reductions, trade in agriculture, and obstacles to the trade of least-developed countries;

1963 GATT Ministerial in Geneva to agree measures to benefit exports from developing countries and establish the Trade Negotiations Committee for a new Round of negotiations on tariffs and anti-dumping measures (Kennedy Round);

1964 Trade Negotiations Committee met in Geneva at Ministerial level to agree guidelines for and formally launch the Kennedy Round;

1964 and 1965 GATT Special Session in Geneva to approve GATT Part IV (trade and development);

1967 GATT Ministerial in Geneva to conclude the Kennedy Round;

1973 GATT Ministerial in Tokyo establishing Trade Negotiations Committee for a new Round of negotiations on tariffs, non-tariffs and "framework" agreements (Tokyo Round);

1982 GATT Ministerial in Geneva to agree a work programme and priorities for future work (which failed to launch a Round);

1986 GATT Ministerial in Punta del Este, Uruguay to establish Trade Negotiations Committee for what became known as the Uruguay Round (negotiations covering tariff reductions, non-tariff measures, rules, services, intellectual property, dispute settlement, textiles, agriculture, and the creation of the WTO);

1988 GATT Ministerials in Montreal and 1989 in Geneva—mid-term review of Uruguay Round;

1990 GATT Ministerial in Brussels to discuss the closing of the Uruguay Round;

1994 Ministerial in Marrakesh to conclude the Uruguay Round Agreements establishing the WTO;

1996 First WTO Ministerial in Singapore to discuss future WTO work programme;

1998 Second WTO Ministerial Conference in Geneva to mark 50th Anniversary of the GATT and start preparations for a possible new Round of trade negotiations (to be launched at the third Ministerial Conference);

1999 Third WTO Ministerial in Seattle to discuss the launch of a new Trade Round.

Records of Ministerial and Official attendance at meetings where rules were considered and agreed could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps were taken at the World Trade Organisation ministerial conference in Seattle to address the concerns of developing countries that existing agreements to put an end to dumping subsidised agricultural products have not been implemented; and if he will make a statement. [101182]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The commitments made by WTO members, as part of the Uruguay Round, to reduce subsidised exports of agricultural products have been fully implemented. Negotiations mandated in the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture on further commitments to reduce agricultural support, including subsidised exports, will start in January 2000. This process will go ahead even though discussions on a wider Round of negotiations were suspended in Seattle.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps were taken at the recent World Trade Organisation ministerial conference in Seattle to address the concerns of developing countries about the Trade-Related Aspects of the Intellectual Property Rights Agreement. [101183]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* Many developing countries with concerns about TRIPS relate to their ability to implement and enforce the agreement effectively. These concerns can be addressed through capacity building and technical assistance to which the UK is committed. If we had been successful in launching a new trade Round at Seattle, other issues of concern to developing countries in particular those relating to the protection of traditional knowledge and skills and increasing the protection for geographical indications could have been included. Opportunities do, however, remain to discuss some of these issues, for example in the built-in agenda of the TRIPS Council and in the forum of the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps were taken at the World Trade Organisation ministerial conference in Seattle to increase market access in sectors of interest to developing countries, particularly agriculture and textiles; and if he will make a statement. [101184]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle was suspended without formal agreement between Members to new improvements to market access for developing countries. However, improvements will be made as part of obligations entered into under agreements which were concluded as part of the Uruguay Round—the so-called built-in agenda. This means, for Agriculture, that negotiations will start in January 2000 in Geneva to continue the process of liberalising agricultural support and protection. For textiles, the planned progressive phase-out of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement will continue, and is due to be completed by 1 January 2005.

In addition we will be pressing the EU to go ahead with its commitment to duty free access for essentially all products from the Least Developed Countries as soon as possible, and with the minimum of exceptions.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures the Government have taken to enhance the capacity of developing countries to participate in World Trade Organisation negotiations; and if he will make a statement. [101197]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The Government are working bilaterally and with a wide range of other organisations, including UNCTAD, the World Bank, ITC and the Commonwealth Secretariat, to help build the capacity of developing countries to participate effectively in WTO and the multilateral trading system. To date, the UK has committed over £15 million to trade-related capacity building programmes of this type and a full list of activities has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

More specifically, in terms of helping developing countries participate in the WTO negotiations at Seattle, the UK has supported bilateral technical assistance programmes in Bangladesh (£0.56 million), Malawi (£0.25 million), South Africa (£0.1 million), Zimbabwe (£0.5 million) and the 14 CARICOM countries in the Caribbean (£1.1 million). A project in Pakistan is currently under review. This technical assistance comprises expert technical advice, training, trade policy studies and negotiating skills and is typically provided to a broad base of stakeholders from national Governments, the private sector and civil society organisations who are involved in trade policy negotiations.

At the multilateral level, developing countries' participation in the WTO negotiations is being particularly supported by a major World Bank Trade Policy Development Programme (TPDP), to which the UK has committed £3 million. TPDP comprises trade policy research and analytical studies; seminars on key issues for the WTO negotiations; training for trade policy officials; and a handbook for trade negotiators from developing countries.

In addition Commonwealth developing countries in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific are benefiting from the Commonwealth Trade and Investment Access Facility (TIAF), to which the UK has committed £1.4 million. TIAF's technical assistance projects include full-time specialist WTO and Trade Policy Advisers based in Geneva and in the Pacific, who have played a key role in helping Commonwealth developing countries prepare for, and participate in, the WTO Seattle Ministerial meeting.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will raise with the Council of Ministers ways of increasing the role of low-income countries in the WTO's decision-making process. [102302]

Mr. Caborn: Reflecting the concerns of developing countries about their effective participation in the decision-making process, the UK in Seattle tabled a proposal in the EU Council of Ministers for a WTO

Reform Conference during 2000 to look at improving formal and informal decision-making processes in WTO. This is one idea, there may be others; but the UK is pressing the issue of WTO reform within the EU as an issue which needs to be urgently addressed.

Research Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Research Council held in Brussels on 2 December; and if he will make a statement. [101692]

Ms Hewitt: The Research Council of 2 December:

1. Concluded bilateral scientific and technological co-operation agreements with Argentina and China and approved a decision to sign a similar agreement with Russia;
2. Adopted Conclusions on the preparation of future Community RTD Framework Programmes;
3. Adopted a Resolution on developing a coherent European space strategy;
4. Adopted Conclusions concerning waste management and decommissioning obsolete nuclear installations of the Joint Research Centre (JRC);
5. Adopted a Decision approving a supplementary programme for the High Flux Reactor at Petten in the Netherlands;
6. Received information from the Commission on the implementation of the Fourth and Fifth Framework Programmes including the participation of associated CEECs and Cyprus, on women and science in light of the recent European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN) report and from the Presidency and the Commission on the ASEM Ministerial Conference of 14–15 October 1999. There was also a discussion on the possible co-ordination of various member states' "Science Week" activities with a European Science Week.

Trade Negotiations

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he intends to consult the public about the Millennium round of trade negotiations. [101649]

Mr. Caborn: My Department has consulted widely in forming the UK position on a new round of trade negotiations. DTI Ministers and Officials have held regular meetings with Non-Governmental Organisations; the Department has issued a document "The UK and the World Trade Organisation: An Introduction to the Next Round" for public comment in addition to consultation documents on WTO services negotiations and possible WTO negotiations on industrial tariffs; and a DTI trade policy website has also been established.

We fully recognise the importance of public consultation and will continue to consult all interested parties on future trade liberalisation in the WTO.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how the minimum wage will be implemented for company directors who wish to elect not to pay themselves a salary during periods of low or negative profits. [101836]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Company Directors are office holders. Office holders are not covered by national minimum wage legislation, which applies to employees and other workers. Only in exceptional circumstances will office holders also have employment contracts making them "workers" for the purposes of employment law. If a company director chooses to work for a company under such an arrangement, his or her right to the minimum wage is the same as that of any other worker. There is no suspension of this right due to the company's hardship.

Cash Dispensers

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to ensure that the providers of cash dispensing machines indicated if any charge will be made for the use of their machines. [102038]

Mr. Byers: My view is that any charges made for using cash machines should be displayed clearly before the transaction proceeds. I am aware that the industry is considering this and I hope that they will reach a voluntary agreement to do this but if not I will use my powers under the Prices Act 1974 to require them to do so.

Mineworkers' Pensions

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what would be the estimated cost to the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme of introducing an entitlement to a full pension at age *(a)* 58 years, *(b)* 55 years and *(c)* 53 years; [102091]

(2) what would be the estimated cost to the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme of introducing pensions at 50 years for miners who are made redundant. [102092]

Mrs. Liddell: These are matters for the Trustees of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme.

Digital Television

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what restrictions apply to the siting of digital television transmitting and receiving stations on rooftops; who can apply for permission for such siting; and to which Government Department. [102053]

Ms Hewitt: The siting of digital television transmission and reception equipment is a matter for local planning authorities in the context of Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Planning Policy Guidance Note 8: Telecommunications (PPG8 revised), and circular 4/99: Planning for Telecommunications, copies of which are available from the Library of the House.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many digital television transmitting and receiving stations there are in London. [102055]

Ms Hewitt: There is one prime Digital Terrestrial transmitter site that covers London. This is located at Crystal Palace. With respect to receiving stations, this is potentially every household that has a UHF aerial. In addition, a number of broadcasters up-link their programmes material from within the London area to satellites for onward transmission, either direct to the home (e.g. for some BskyB services), or to cable head ends for subsequent distribution to the home through cable networks.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the lowest permissible height for digital television transmitting and receiving stations. [102054]

Ms Hewitt: Digital equipment is sited to deliver the best transmission and reception arrangements. For digital UHF, the higher the aerial the better the reception. Higher sited transmit antennas will also send a signal further, but with a greater potential for interference with other radio transmitters. The siting of the transmission masts and stations is a matter for local planning authorities in accordance with Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Planning Policy Guidance Note 8: Telecommunications (PPG8 revised) and circular 4/99: Planning for Telecommunications, copies of which are available from the Library of the House.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which frequencies have been granted to News International Digital Television by the Radio Authority. [102052]

Ms Hewitt: Racal Telecom hold a number of licences which are issued by the Radiocommunications Agency, under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949, to use the radio spectrum to up-link material to satellites for onward transmission from the News International building at Wapping. The bands used for this purpose are at 14GHz. The Radio Authority has issued no licences under the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996 in relation to sound broadcasting services over these frequencies.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he granted a licence for News International to place a digital television transmitting and receiving station on the roof of its building in Wapping. [102056]

Ms Hewitt: Licences under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949 for the use of radio transmission equipment (satellite up-links) at the News International Building in Wapping were issued to Racal Telecom on 12 January 1999, 2 February 1999 and 31 March 1999. For the most part, (with the notable exception of the Television Reception Licence used to finance the BBC), receiving stations are exempt from licensing under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949.

Trade Union Recognition

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the timetable is for implementation of those provisions of the Employment Relations Act 1999 relating to trade union recognition. [102304]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government intend to bring these provisions into force shortly after Easter next year.

Ghana

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the total value of trade between the UK and Ghana for each of the last five years; and what is his estimate for the current year. [101969]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* Information on UK trade in goods with Ghana is given in the following table. Information on trade in services is not available.

£ million

Year	*UK exports*	*UK imports*
1994	190.7	138.7
1995	240.1	163.8
1996	279.1	189.3
1997	270.2	135.0
1998	222.2	155.2
1999[1]	144.1	139.7

[1] January to October

Source:

Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise.

Assisted Areas

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the timescale for the review of Objective 2 and assisted areas status. [102341]

Mr. Caborn: My Department has been discussing with the Commission the proposals for the new Objective 2 areas which we submitted on 8 October. We hope that the Commission will approve the areas in principle before Christmas and give formal approval in January.

The four-month timetable for the submission of draft Objective 2 programmes to the Commission starts running from the date on which the map is approved. However, the Regulation allows funding to begin from 1 January 2000 provided that draft programmes are submitted by 30 April.

Discussions are continuing with the Commission on the proposed new Assisted Areas map which we submitted in July. We are seeking early approval of our new Assisted Areas and will formally announce the new map as soon as possible.

Terminal Illness

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to provide employment protection to employees taking compassionate leave to care for terminally ill relatives and friends. [102538]

Mr. Alan Johnson: From 15 December 1999, all employees will be entitled to take a reasonable amount of time off work to deal with an emergency involving a dependant, and will be protected from dismissal or detriment for doing so. For the first time, employees will be able to take a short amount of leave when a dependant falls ill, which will help them make longer term care arrangements.

As part of our wider strategy of promoting family friendly employment policies, we will be encouraging employers to go beyond the legal minimum, for example, by providing longer periods of leave to employees on compassionate grounds.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

International Court of Justice

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs under what international agreement the International Court of Justice at the Hague would act in respect of action taken by armed military force of the European Union. [101896]

Mr. Vaz: As is the case with the Western European Union, the European Union would, if new crisis management arrangements are agreed, only use force if it would be lawful under international law.

The International Court of Justice can exercise jurisdiction only if the States concerned have both accepted the jurisdiction of the Court. This can be done by an ad hoc agreement; by being parties to a treaty which confers the necessary jurisdiction on the Court; or by matching acceptances of jurisdiction under Article 36 of the Statute of the Court.

The EU, like the WEU, is not itself subject to the jurisdiction of the Court. Only States are subject to it.

British Deaths (Nigeria)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 405–06W, what assessment he has made of the factors underlying the inability of the British High Commission in Nigeria to obtain the complete police report on the death of Mr. Mark Davey. [102135]

Mr. Hain: The British High Commission in Abuja has done everything it properly can to obtain this report from the Nigerian authorities. Sadly, difficulties in obtaining such formal reports from the appropriate authorities are not unusual. Changes in the political system over the last year, and subsequent changes in personnel in the Government, civil service and police have been contributing factors.

Kosovo

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps K-For is taking to secure the return of Kosovar coal and mineral mines to their former owners; and what reports he has received on the extent of shareholdings in the Trepca Company by President Milosovic and his family. [101962]

Mr. Vaz: The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has responsibility for the Trepca industrial complex. UNMIK has said it will run state property for the benefit of all communities in Kosovo, with issues of ownership, which are inevitably complex in Kosovo's present circumstances, to be resolved later. The priority is to promote a functioning economy in Kosovo as quickly as possible.

The exact balance of involvement by the FRY/Serbian regime and its supporters in the ownership of the Trepca industrial complex is difficult to assess. The Government in Belgrade exercises extensive control over the public and private sectors of the economy, both directly and through banks and businesses manipulated by the regime.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date was the Government's last reassessment of the situation in Sri Lanka with respect to the appropriateness of granting export licences for controlled exports to that country. [102185]

Mr. Hain: Our policy on defence exports to Sri Lanka, as with all other countries, is constantly kept under review. Each export licence application is considered scrupulously on a case by case basis in accordance with national and EU criteria. Particular attention is paid to the Sri Lankan Government's human rights record and its legitimate defence and domestic security interests.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has made to the Government of Sri Lanka concerning human rights violations by the Sri Lankan army and security forces. [102183]

Mr. Hain: We maintain a dialogue with the Sri Lankan Government and the armed forces on a wide range of issues including human rights and the importance of bringing to justice those responsible for abuses.

UN Security Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy on the composition of the UN Security Council; and if he will make a statement. [102312]

Mr. Hain: We believe early enlargement of the Security Council is essential to make the Council more representative of the world today. Making the Council more representative will enhance its authority and credibility.

We support expansion of the Security Council from 15 members to 24. We propose five additional permanent seats: two for Germany and Japan plus three for developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America respectively. We also support four new non-permanent seats: one each for Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

British Embassies

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy that British mineral water be served at British embassies in Europe. [102770]

Mr. Hain: No. The Government's Public Purchasing Consolidated Guidelines require goods and services to be acquired by competition unless there are convincing reasons to the contrary. The selection of a particular product or supplier solely on the grounds of national preference would run counter to this policy.

UN Co-ordinator, Baghdad

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason he seeks to terminate the employment of Mr. Hans van Sponeck as a UN co-ordinator in Baghdad. [102449]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 257W.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102074]

Mr. Hain: The information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Torture

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 406W, on the use of torture in OSCE participating countries, if he will list the parts of the OSCE region in which instances of abuse persist. [102321]

Mr. Vaz: As noted in my previous answer to the hon. Gentleman, instances of torture can occur even in countries with strong human rights protections. While in some countries there are effective mechanisms for the reporting and investigation of such abuse, in others there are not. It is not, therefore, possible to give an accurate and comprehensive list of countries where instances of torture persist.

At the OSCE Review Conference in Istanbul reports of torture in various countries in the OSCE region, especially the Central Asian republics, were raised. Several states, including Turkey, Russia and the United States of America, also acknowledged that their own systems were not perfect and outlined measures they were taking to strengthen protection of the human rights of detainees.

Jonas Savimbi

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* representations he has received from and *(b)* meetings he and his officials have held with, which organisations concerning the indictment of Jonas Savimbi for war crimes and crimes against humanity. [102490]

Mr. Hain: The Angolan Government has made public its view that Savimbi should be indicted for war crimes on a number of occasions in the United Nations Security Council, at meetings of the Southern Africa Development Community and in Luanda. We have received similar representations both in London and overseas on behalf of the Angola Emergency Campaign some of whose representatives I met on 8 November.

Venice Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will announce the name of the United Kingdom representative to the Venice Commission. [101980]

Mr. Vaz: We are in the process of appointing a UK member, and expect to make an announcement in the new year. For the sake of transparency we have consulted non-governmental organisations and academic bodies for nominations. We have also appointed an external member to the selection panel.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Portadown, RUC

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations were made by *(a)* individuals, *(b)* businesses, *(c)* churches and *(d)* political representatives to the Portadown Sub Division of the Royal Ulster Constabulary between 1 January 1997 and 27 April 1997 regarding the security and safety of nationalists in Portadown town centre; and what steps were taken by the RUC in respect of such representations. [101809]

Mr. Ingram: There is no record of any such representations having been made during this time.

Company Numbers

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the change in the number of companies in Northern Ireland in the most recent 12-month period for which figures are available. [102482]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

DEFENCE

EU Co-operation

17. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on defence co-operation with other EU member states. [100970]

Mr. Hoon: We continue to develop our bilateral and multilateral defence relations with the other EU member states.

In particular, we want to strengthen the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, so that Europe can speak with authority and act decisively in response to crises where the North Atlantic Alliance as a whole is not engaged.

We are making good progress with our Allies and Partners both in the European Union, in the Western European Union and in NATO.

21. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made since the St. Malo agreement in promoting Anglo-French co-operation in defence. [100974]

37. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made since the St. Malo agreement in promoting Anglo-French co-operation in defence. [100991]

Mr. Hoon: Work has been taken forward on planning for non-combat evacuation operations; joint exercises; improved links between operational headquarters;

co-ordination of naval deployments; information exchanges on peacekeeping activities; Year 2000 computer problems; logistics; and arrangements for dealing with the media.

Specific examples of co-operation are: the posting of liaison offices into operational headquarters, the attachment of HMS Somerset, and later HMS Grafton, to the French Foch Carrier Task Group in the Adriatic during the Kosovo conflict; and co-operation on media handling during the Kosovo conflict. We also signed a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement at the UK/France Summit held on 25 November.

Ballistic Missiles

18. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent meetings he has had with his US and European counterparts to discuss ballistic missile defence. [100971]

Mr. Hoon: We have a continuous dialogue with the US, and with our European allies on ballistic missile defence issues. The US has briefed us—nationally and in NATO—on their current thinking on the possible deployment of a National Missile Defence System.

Departmental Land

19. **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the total value of MOD land and property sold since July 1998. [R] [100972]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Gross total receipts from the disposal of land and buildings in Financial Year 1998–99 was £158 million. We expect to receive £261 million in Financial Year 1999–2000. The Strategic Defence Review set a four-year target of £700 million for Financial Year 1998–99 to 2001–02 and we are on track to achieve this.

Invincible

20. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the Government's plans to procure replacements for the current Invincible class of aircraft carriers. [100973]

35. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the Government's plans to procure replacements for the current Invincible class of aircraft carrier. [100988]

Mr. Hoon: Competitive contracts for the Future Aircraft Carrier Assessment Phase were awarded on 23 November to British Aerospace Land and Sea Systems and Thomson-CSF Naval Combat Systems. The Assessment Phase will investigate options for carrier design and by 2003 deliver proposals for the demonstration and manufacture of the vessels. The carriers are scheduled to enter service in 2012 and 2015.

Aircraft Wiring

22. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the minimum estimated life of wiring in military aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [100975]

Mr. Spellar: Replacement intervals for electrical wiring are not prescribed in advance. Wiring is rigorously inspected during maintenance and replaced as necessary.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military aircraft have been grounded as a result of advice on the safety of Kapton wiring. [100925]

Mr. Spellar: None. However, following two instances of electrical fires on RAF Harrier aircraft in 1991, the Harrier GR5 and GR7 fleets were restricted to operational flying only for a short period. Subsequent investigation showed that the fires had occurred as a result of the mis-routeing of wires. Modifications were subsequently introduced to improve the electrical installation.

Rapid Intervention

24. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the prospects for creating a European force for rapid intervention in crises. [100977]

Mr. Hoon: We need to address the shortfalls in European military capability, as highlighted by experience in Kosovo and identified in the Western European Union's audit of European assets and capabilities, and in NATO's Defence Capabilities Initiative.

EU member states have committed themselves to strengthening their existing military capabilities so that European nations are able to assemble, deploy rapidly and sustain more effective forces for specific NATO or EU-led operations. We are not proposing to create a standing European Rapid Reaction Force.

Northern Ireland

25. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the work of the force research unit of the intelligence corps in Northern Ireland during the past decade. [100978]

Mr. Spellar: The Force Intelligence Unit (FIU) provides analytical support and security advice to assist the RUC in defeating terrorism.

Medical Services

26. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much extra the Government are spending on the Defence Medical Services over the next three years as a result of the comprehensive spending review. [100979]

Mr. Spellar: The Strategic Defence Review made an additional £140 million available for the Defence Medical Services over the four years from 1998–99 to 2001–02, of which around £125 million falls in the years 1999–2000 to 2001–02.

Efficiency Programme

27. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of all the efficiency measures taken in 1998–99 that contribute to the overall efficiency programme. [100980]

Mr. Spellar: Some 1,300 measures contributed to the successful achievement of £594 million worth of efficiency in 1998–99, £89 million more than the target. A list of representative measures and a further list of the most significant measures for this period has been supplied to the House of Commons Defence Committee. The representative list is contained in the Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Defence Committee on

21 April, a copy of which is in the Library of the House. My Department does not hold a centrally compiled list of efficiency measures, nor does it duplicate activities delegated to managers for proper control of the detail of the efficiency programme.

Kosovo

28. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on troop levels in Kosovo. [100981]

Mr. Spellar: British forces in Kosovo currently contribute a framework Brigade headquarters and two battle groups plus supporting elements. As our Allies have increased their contribution to KFOR operations, we have been able to make a commensurate reduction to the number of British forces deployed in the region without detriment to KFOR's overall capability. Our contribution to KFOR now numbers less than 4,000—down from a peak of 10,400. KFOR as a whole continues to operate at its intended strength of around 50,000.

RAF Buchan

29. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received regarding the possible closure of RAF Buchan; and if he will make a statement. [100982]

Mr. Spellar: In addition to a letter from the hon. Member of 4 October 1999, I have received a letter regarding the future of RAF Buchan from the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) as well as correspondence from MSPs. My Department has also received three letters from local authorities and agencies and one from a former MP for Banff and Buchan. In addition, I received a delegation of representatives from Aberdeen Council on 20 October 1999. Some of the issues raised during consultation require further investigation before a final decision can be made on the future of RAF Buchan. I would hope to be able to make an announcement on this subject in the new year.

Service Families

30. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made by the Service Families Task Force in promoting welfare and support provision for service families; and if he will make a statement. [100983]

Mr. Spellar: The Service Families Task force has made good progress. The needs of service children are now recognised in the Department for Education and Employment's Codes of Practice on Schools Admission and Appeals. Service Children's Education, a Defence agency, now sits on key local education authority admission forums. The Department of Health has established incentive schemes for NHS dentists in 24 areas where there are large numbers of service families. The Department for Social Security and the Department for Social Security (Northern Ireland) have established simpler procedures for transferring claims for child benefit when moving to and from Northern Ireland.

We are now working with the Department for Education and Employment to address the eligibility of service children for student loans, and with the same Department and the Department for Social Security to address the rules for claiming Jobseekers' Allowance.

Green Transport Plans

31. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress his Department is making in developing green transport plans. [100984]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Green Transport Plans are being taken forward as part of my Department's development of a corporate Environmental Management System. Plans are being prepared for sites across the Defence Estate where the potential impacts on travel patterns are thought likely to be significant. Initially, 23 sites have been asked to develop plans. Plans for headquarters buildings in London have not been drawn up due to the refurbishment of Main Building and the planned reduction in the number of other buildings.

Albion and Bulwark

32. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the anticipated date in service of the new HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. [100985]

Mr. Kilfoyle: HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, the two Landing Platform Dock (Replacements), were planned to enter service in 2002 and 2003 respectively. These dates have, however, slipped due to industrial loading problems at the BAe Systems shipyard at Barrow. The current estimate of the slippage indicates delays to the in service dates of around one year for the first ship and some nine months for the second ship. Discussions with the company continue, with the aim of reducing these delays.

Territorial Army

33. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on recruitment to the Territorial Army. [100986]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave to the hon. Members for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) earlier today, *official Report,* columns 7–8.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Territorial Army are currently serving *(a)* in Kosovo, *(b)* in Bosnia and *(c)* elsewhere overseas. [100976]

Mr. Spellar: As of 3 December 1999, there were 288 members of the Territorial Army serving in Bosnia, 229 serving in Kosovo and two serving elsewhere overseas.

European Strategic Defence Initiative

34. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the European strategic defence initiative. [100987]

36. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the European security and defence identity. [100989]

Mr. Hoon: At the Helsinki European Council, EU member states committed themselves to strengthening their military capabilities so that European nations will be able to assemble, deploy rapidly and sustain more effective forces for specific NATO or EU-led operations. EU member states also agreed to develop the military structures necessary for the EU to decide and act on crisis management operations.

These aims are complementary to work under way in NATO and the Western European Union, all of which will have the effect of strengthening the European contribution to NATO.

Gurkha Pensions

38. **Mr. Burnett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his review of Gurkha pensions. [100992]

Mr. Spellar: The examination of Gurkha pensions and gratuities is still continuing. We hope to be able to make an announcement shortly.

Command Vehicles

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of adding the Raven 2V frequency-hopping digital radios and the ROVIS digital harnesses to the Scimitar and Sultan command vehicles. [99413]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There are no plans to fit the Raven 2V frequency-hopping radio or the ROVIS digital harnesses into operational Scimitar or Sultan command vehicles. However, as part of a series of studies, my Department was provided with, free of charge, Raven radios and a ROVIS harness for trials involving Scimitar and Sultan. These trials, the result of which were shared with industry, were to improve the Department's ability to evaluate digitisation technology. As part of the partnership arrangement with industry, BAe carried out the installation and its cost is therefore not available to MOD.

RAID System

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many United Kingdom aircraft the Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing Systems will be installed; and if he will make a statement. [101658]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing System requirement is for all current RAF fast jets to be capable of operating with the system.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the operational life of the Royal Air Force's Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing System. [101660]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing System requirement is for a system operational life of 20 years with each pod having a life of 8,000 flying hours.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of installing Marconi Electronic Systems' Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing Systems on an aircraft. [101657]

Mr. Kilfoyle: We are currently in the process of tender evaluation of competing proposals for Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing Systems and it would be inappropriate to comment on aircraft installation costs at this time.

Tornado Crash

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reports he has received of the most recent Royal Air Force Tornado crash. [101662]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I await the report of the Board of Inquiry convened following the crash of an RAF Tornado F3 from RAF Conningsby on 17 November 1999. A summary of the Board of Inquiry's findings will be placed in the Library of the House once this is completed.

Staff Dispositions

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Royal Navy he expects to be *(a)* at sea and *(b)* in a non-United Kingdom post on 25 December 1999, 31 December 1999 and 1 January 2000; what percentage of overall strength of the Royal Navy this represents; and if he will make a statement. [101729]

Mr. Spellar: Projections of the number of personnel serving overseas or at sea cover the Christmas period as a whole and are not available on a day-to-day basis. During the period 25 December 1999 to 1 January 2000, it is expected that some 647 Naval Service personnel will be at sea. Some 964 personnel will be serving in non-UK posts over the same period. The combined figure of 1,611 represents approximately 4.2 per cent. of the Naval Service Trained Strength.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Royal Navy were *(a)* at sea and *(b)* in a non-United Kingdom post on (i) 25 December 1998, (ii) 31 December 1998 and (iii) 1 January 1999; and what percentage of overall strength of the Royal Navy that represented. [101713]

Mr. Spellar: Statistics on the number of personnel serving overseas or at sea cover the Christmas period as a whole and are not available on a day-to-day basis. During the period 25 December 1998 to 1 January 1999, 594 Naval Service personnel were at sea. A further 948 personnel were serving in non-UK posts. The combined figure of 1,542 represented approximately 3.9 per cent. of the Naval Service Trained Strength.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of *(a)* the RAF, *(b)* the Army and *(c)* the Royal Navy were serving (i) abroad accompanied, (ii) abroad unaccompanied and (iii) deployed in front-line duties on (1) 25 December 1998, (2) 31 December 1998 and (3) 1 January 1999; and what percentage of overall strength of each force this represented. [101711]

Mr. Spellar: Statistics on the number of personnel serving overseas cover the Christmas period as a whole and are not available on a day-to-day basis. During the period 25 December 1998 to 1 January 1999, the RAF had 4,403 married personnel serving abroad, 1,574 single personnel serving abroad and 2,382 personnel deployed on front-line duties. The combined figure of 8,359 represented 16.1 per cent. of the RAF's Trained Strength.

During the same period, the Army had 14,404 married personnel serving abroad, 10,034 single personnel serving abroad and 5,197 personnel deployed on front-line duties. The combined figure of 29,635 represented 30.7 per cent. of the Army's Trained Strength.

Also during the same period the Naval Service had 703 married personnel serving abroad, 143 single personnel serving abroad and 696 personnel deployed on front-line duties at sea and ashore. The combined figure of 1,542 represented 3.9 per cent. of the Naval Service's Trained Strength.

Information on whether married personnel were accompanied or unaccompanied is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of *(a)* the RAF, *(b)* the Army and *(c)* the Royal Navy he expects to be serving (i) abroad accompanied, (ii) abroad unaccompanied and (iii) deployed in front-line duties on (1) 25 December 1999, (2) 31 December 1999 and (3) 1 January 2000; what percentage of overall strength of each force this represents; and if he will make a statement. [101712]

Mr. Spellar: Projections of the number of personnel serving overseas cover the Christmas period as a whole and are not available on a day-to-day basis. During the period 25 December 1999 to 1 January 2000, it is expected that the RAF will have 3,641 married personnel serving abroad, 1,160 single personnel serving abroad and 2,252 personnel deployed on front-line duties. The combined figure of 7,053 represents 13.8 per cent. of the RAF's trained strength.

During the same period, the Army is expected to have 12,851 married personnel serving aboard, 14,544 single personnel serving abroad and 5,800 personnel deployed on front-line duties. The combined figure of 33,195 represents 34.4 per cent. of the Army's trained strength.

Also during the same period the Naval Service is expected to have 691 married personnel serving abroad, 154 single personnel serving abroad and 766 personnel deployed on front-line duties at sea and ashore. The combined figure of 1,611 represents 4.2 per cent. of the Naval Service's trained strength.

Information on whether married personnel were accompanied or unaccompanied is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Large Transport Aircraft

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's requirement for the procurement of large transport aircraft. [101655]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on 8 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 397W.

Naval Vessels

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the planned deployments overseas by naval vessels which have been cancelled this year, indicating the reasons for cancellation. [101614]

Mr. Spellar: Three deployments away from the UK/Northern European theatre have been cancelled this year. These were the deployment of an Amphibious Task Group to the West Indies in May and June for operational reasons related to Kosovo; a deployment by an Aircraft Carrier Group to the USA and Caribbean from February to April for operational reasons relating to the Gulf; and a submarine deployment to the Gulf in March for operational reasons relating to Kosovo. I gave details on 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 560W of the naval vessels which had been withdrawn this year from exercises in the UK/Northern European theatre.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Tony Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what advice he has sought on the legality of British nuclear deterrence policy; [102127]

(2) what review of nuclear targeting policy he has conducted since the International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons of 8 July 1996; and if he will make a statement. [102126]

Mr. Hoon: Legal considerations are always taken into account in the formulation and application of defence policy. I am confident that our nuclear policy and posture, as set out most recently in the Strategic Defence Review, is entirely compatible with our obligations under international law.

Mr. Tony Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which section or sections of his Department are responsible for nuclear targeting policy. [102125]

Mr. Hoon: Our nuclear missiles are not targeted. Within the Ministry of Defence, the Chief of the Defence Staff acts as principal adviser on the operational deployment of our nuclear deterrent. He is supported in this role by a range of senior officers and officials.

Royal Marines (Women)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's policy in respect of the employment of women in posts in the Royal Marines. [101936]

Mr. Spellar: We are committed to equality of opportunity in the Armed Forces, and some 73 per cent. of the posts within the Naval Service are already open to women. The possibilities for further extending employment opportunities for women were considered in the Strategic Defence Review. It was decided that posts in the Royal Marines General Service, and similar posts in the other Services whose primary role in battle is to 'close with and kill the enemy', should be subject to further work to assess the potential impact on combat effectiveness of opening such posts to women. This work is currently in hand.

Royal Irish Regiment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what correspondence he has received in the past two years concerning paramilitary infiltration of the Royal Irish Regiment *(a)* at Alma barracks, Catterick and *(b)* elsewhere; and what standing orders have been

issued concerning (i) display of paramilitary insignia and emblems and (ii) possession or distribution of documents and other materials. [102031]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date rules governing the security of classified documents and sensitive personal information were changed to restrict access by units of the Royal Irish Regiment; and if he will make a statement. [102032]

Mr. Spellar: Members of the Royal Irish Regiment are afforded the same access to classified information as any member of the British Army holding similar rank, position and responsibility. That access is strictly limited on a 'need to know' basis.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102329]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There are over 90,000 buildings on the Defence Estate of which a number will have rooms allocated for religious observances of staff, pregnant and nursing mothers and smokers as required. The number of rooms set aside for such purposes is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Satellite Television

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress in fitting satellite television facilities on Royal Navy ships. [102343]

Mr. Spellar: The majority of the RN's major warships are currently fitted with conventional domestic satellite equipment which provides reception while in harbour in European waters. To allow reception while at sea, two of the aircraft carriers, HMS Invincible and HMS Illustrious, have been fitted with a gyro-stabilised satellite television dish. This type of dish will be also fitted to the third aircraft carrier, HMS Ark Royal, during her current refit at Rosyth. As there is no room to fit these dishes on the remaining major warships, an alternative system, which utilises existing satellite communications equipment, is currently being trialled. This system would allow the ship's crews to see broadcasts within about 12 hours of transmission. If the trials are successful, we plan to commence installation on board the major warships.

The minor war vessels receive terrestrial television, and there are currently no plans to enhance this facility to include satellite television.

Medical Assessment Programme

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the guidance produced by his Department's Medical Assessment Programme for the administration of tests to monitor the effects of depleted uranium exposure experienced by military and medical auxiliary personnel involved in the Gulf War in 1991. [102175]

Mr. Spellar: MAP policy on testing for uranium was set out in a MOD paper published on 19 March 1999 entitled "Testing for the Presence of Depleted Uranium—The Current Position". A copy of the paper is in the Library of the House. In summary, testing for uranium is carried out when, in the judgment of the MAP physician, there is a clinical need. The patient is required to provide urine over a 24-hour period which is then tested by a suitably accredited laboratory. Advice on Depleted Uranium is contained in the MOD's publication intended for GPs and other health professionals entitled "Gulf Veterans' Illnesses: Information Pack" dated May 1999. A copy is in the Library of the House.

I have in addition offered to arrange independent testing specifically for depleted uranium for those Gulf veterans who have privately had their urine tested for depleted uranium in Canada. This offer was made specifically to address the concerns of those tested. A draft protocol, under which this testing will take place, has been passed to veterans associations and others for comment. I will place a copy of the agreed protocol in the Library of the House in due course.

Human Rights

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 454W, on the terms of service of young people in the armed forces, if he will list the steps to which he referred and by which his Department will ensure the compatibility of personnel policies with the Human Rights Act 1998. [102445]

Mr. Spellar: Further to my answer of 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 454W, my Department maintains a constant review of its personnel policies. We have not yet identified any need to make changes to the current terms of service of young people in order to ensure compatibility with the Human Rights Act 1998.

RAF Chinook

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the inquiry by the Air Accidents Investigation Branch into the RAF Chinook crash on the Mull of Kintyre was independent of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [101402]

Mr. Spellar: The Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB) is an independent part of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It is not unusual for the Ministry of Defence to take advantage of their expertise to examine the site of a military aircraft accident and/or undertake a full or limited wreckage analysis; this was the case with the Chinook crash on the Mull of Kintyre.

Military Air Accident Investigations

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if reports by the Air Accidents Investigation Branch into military accidents are placed in the public domain. [101403]

Mr. Spellar: The Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB) of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) investigate all accidents involving civil aircraft in the United Kingdom and its reports are published by The Stationary Office. If both

military and civil aircraft are involved, a military Board of Inquiry will run in parallel with the AAIB investigation whose report will be published in the usual way.

If a civilian aircraft is not involved, a RAF Board of Inquiry may, if it wishes, seek the assistance of the AAIB to examine the accident site and/or undertake a full or limited wreckage analysis. The AAIB report then forms part of the evidence of the Board of Inquiry. These reports are not published but may be provided to the next of kin in the event of a fatality as an Annexe to the Board of Inquiry findings. The next of kin are not restricted on copying the report further.

Depleted Uranium Ordnance

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the firing of depleted uranium shells at the Kirkcudbright range; and if he will estimate the approximate number of shells which landed in the waters of the Solway in the last 15 years. [102452]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Tam Dalyell, dated 13 December 1999:

I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about Depleted Uranium (DU) firings at the Kirkcudbright Range since these firings are now conducted by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) on behalf of MOD.

DU has been fired at the Kirkcudbright Range since 1982 and there is a continuing need for proof testing of the ammunition while it remains in service. Over the last 15 years, some 6350 rounds have been fired into the Solway Firth. A programme of environmental monitoring has been in place at the range since 1982. The monitoring programme has confirmed that there are only low levels of DU contamination which are well below anything that could be considered a health hazard either to those who work at the sites or those living nearby.

In addition, in 1993 the MOD commissioned the consultants WS Atkins to conduct an independent environmental impact assessment of the firing of DU. The report of the study concluded that there was no significant risk to the public or to site personnel form air emissions from malfunctioning DU projectiles or marine food chain sources. A copy of that report has been placed in the House Library. Our own comprehensive environmental monitoring programme continues to confirm that this is still the case. The monitoring reports are all within the public domain; the most recent one was presented at a public meeting of the Dumfries and Galloway Stewartry Area Committee on 22 September 1999.

DERA, however, is not complacent about these results. We work, closely, as you may know, with local interested parties and, in particular, have a close relationship with the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). To this end, a meeting between representatives from DERA's Test & Evaluation Ranges Sector and Radiation Protection Services and SEPA was held on 29 November to review the progress on monitoring and to discuss plans for the future.

Hostile Aircraft

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many hostile aircraft have been shot down by Royal Air Force and Royal Navy fighters in the past 25 years; and if he will make a statement. [102455]

Mr. Spellar: The only conflict in the last 25 years in which Royal Navy and Royal Air Force aircraft have shot down hostile aircraft was the Falklands conflict of 1982. Twenty-three Argentine aircraft were shot down, of which 17 were downed by Fleet Air Arm pilots and six were shot down by RAF pilots serving with Naval Air Squadrons.

Beef Suppliers

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the country of origin of beef sold to UK forces *(a)* in the UK, *(b)* in Gibraltar, *(c)* in the Falkland Islands, *(d)* in Kosovo and *(e)* in Bosnia; and if he will make a statement. [102456]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The supply of food to our Armed Forces in the UK and overseas is contracted out. My Department does not specify the source from which our contractors should obtain beef (or any other products) but expects them to seek the best market price, whilst giving full consideration to British products. The beef currently supplied to our Armed Forces based in the UK is 100 per cent. British beef. The beef supplied for our service personnel based in Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands, Kosovo and Bosnia is presently sourced primarily from Australia, New Zealand, Uruguay and Brazil.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if any zones in the Millennium Dome will not be fully functioning by *(a)* 10 December, *(b)* 24 December and *(c)* 31 December. [98822]

Janet Anderson: Work continues to complete the individual exhibit zones within the Dome. Zones are being completed in phases so as to enable the effective management of the overall site logistics, including contractor vehicle and staff movements. I am advised that all the zones will be fully functioning by the time of the opening celebration on 31 December 1999.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many parking spaces are currently allocated for very important persons at the Millennium Dome. [99320]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* Through its marketing and ticketing strategies, the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is encouraging visitors to leave their cars and join public transport as close to their homes as possible. In addition, travel and tour operators are offering attractive travel and Dome admission packages. NMEC has parking capacity away from the Dome but close to good public transport links to North Greenwich using existing car parks where possible. When, in exceptional circumstances, NMEC is advised that parking is required for a particular VIP visit, it will be accommodated. There are no parking spaces dedicated for use by VIPs visiting the Dome.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets to the Millennium Dome within the first eight weeks for which they were on sale were *(a)* sold at full single adult rate, *(b)* sold at full single child rate, *(c)* sold at full family rate, *(d)* sold at discounted rates, *(e)* given away to sponsors, *(f)* given away in competition and *(g)* otherwise disposed of. [99335]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is concerned not to affect the ongoing success of ticket sales through publication of selected statistics at this stage. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of expectations and, at over one million, are far outstripping advance sales for any visitor attraction anywhere in the world for 2000. I am confident that NMEC will achieve its 12 million visitor target and that the resulting income targets will also be met, enabling the project, over its lifetime, to be delivered within the £758 million cash budget set for it in February 1997. I can confirm categorically that no tickets have been given away free to sponsors.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he intends to write to the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central concerning ticket sales for the Millennium Experience following his answer of 11 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 834W. [100677]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* I wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) on 6 December and arranged for a copy of my response to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the Mayor and Assembly of London will be permitted to make a bid during the eventual sale of the Millennium Dome. [101315]

Janet Anderson: The competition for the future of the Dome is well underway and we hope to announce a final shortlist of bidders early in the new year. This is prior to the Mayoral election and formation of the Assembly.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the timetable for the disposal of the Millennium Dome. [100260]

Janet Anderson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 324W.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the criteria are for allocation of tickets for the Millennium Dome celebrations on 31 December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [99854]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The New Millennium Experience Company, in liaison with the Government and others, has aimed to achieve an inclusive, exciting event, embracing a wide range of people of all ages and backgrounds and with the majority from "ordinary" life, and others who have made a contribution to, or have a responsibility for some aspect of, the project. The criteria for the allocation of tickets has been framed accordingly. As NMEC announced in June 1999, up to 3,000 of the approximate 10,000 guests are being drawn from national and local newspaper competitions; other public tickets are going to Millennium Commission Award Winners and members of the public associated with Millennium Commission projects, together with residents from the London Borough of Greenwich as the "host" borough. In addition, some of the project's sponsors are running public competitions. NMEC's further press release on 4 November gave details of how the celebration to open the Dome will be a passionate, powerful and spectacular event befitting the nation's welcome to the new Millennium.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which celebrities have agreed to perform in the Millennium Dome on 31 December. [101619]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* As the New Millennium Experience Company announced on 4 November, there will be a combined cast of over 900 performers using music, dance, and carnival, to move and inspire the audience within the Dome and the world-wide television audience of billions on 31 December 1999. The celebrations will start with the arrival of Her Majesty the Queen, following which the Archbishop of Canterbury will read the Lord's Prayer. The celebrations will feature Paul Daniel (Director of the English National Opera) directing an 80 piece orchestra, a mixed choir of more than 400, Jools Holland and his big band, and celebrity soloists from the worlds of popular and classical music. Announcements about other individual performers will be made in due course.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been spent on publicity for *(a)* the Millennium Dome and *(b)* the Big Time Millennium eve celebrations; what is the total budget for these projects; and in terms of both current spend and projected budgets, if he will break this down by (i) consultants, including outside PR agencies, (ii) press offices, (iii) advertising and (iv) other expenses. [101618]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The New Millennium Experience Company's (NMEC) marketing, communications and commercial budget, for the Millennium Experience, which includes the costs of publicity is set out in the company's Annual Report and Financial Statements to 31 March and was published in July 1999. NMEC considers that individual components of that budget are commercially confidential and that publication of the information in the categories requested would adversely impact on the company's ability to obtain optimum value for money from future procurement of the services set out, and would adversely impact on the company's relationship with its existing contractors in those fields. In the absence of a London-wide authority, and at the invitation of relevant Government Departments, statutory authorities, and the Millennium Commission, NMEC agreed in December 1998 to take responsibility for the co-ordination and management of the Big Time event, which focuses on new year's eve celebrations in central London on and alongside the River Thames between Vauxhall Bridge and Tower Bridge and at other specific locations nearby. Big Time is supported by the Millennium Commission as part of its Millennium Festival programme and London is one of 22 cities being supported in this way. The resources for Big Time are separate from those of the Millennium Experience's £758 million cash budget, but they will be accounted for by NMEC in the company's next Annual Report and Financial Statements, which will cover the period 1 April 1999 to 31 December 1999 and will be published in the new year. Details of the individual contracts relevant to Big Time are considered by NMEC to be commercially confidential.

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much his Department has spent on Ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98700]

Mr. Chris Smith: The total cost of providing the Government Car Service for my Department was £318,807 in 1997–98 and £351,875 in 1998–99.

Digital Television

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many representations he has received *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* against the suggested supplement to the licence fee for digital television purposes. [99322]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* To date we have received 543 representations on the independent review panel's recommendation for a digital licence supplement. Of those *(a)* 14 were in favour and *(b)* 529 were against the proposal.

BBC World Service Television

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what recent representations he has received concerning the BBC's decision to remove current affairs and analysis programmes from the schedules of the BBC World Service Television; and if he will make a statement; [101361]

(2) if he will meet the Chairman of the BBC to discuss the proposed reductions in resources and personnel in BBC World Service Television. [101377]

Janet Anderson: We have received three representations from hon. Members and their constituents. I have no present plans to meet the Chairman of the BBC to discuss BBC World, as it is a long standing principle that the Government do not intervene in the BBC's programming and editorial issues.

BBC Funding

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the resolution of the National Assembly for Wales of 16 November concerning the future funding of the BBC; and what response he plans to make. [101646]

Janet Anderson: We are currently considering the recommendations of the independent review panel on the future funding of the BBC in the light of the responses to the public consultation and will take the National Assembly for Wales' resolution into account as part of that process. We expect to announce our final decisions in January.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if Pannell Kerr Forster will accept external submissions to their review of the future funding of the BBC; [102418]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that the views of the commercial broadcasting sector will be taken into account in the review of the BBC's funding being undertaken by Pannell Kerr Forster. [102417]

Mr. Chris Smith: Pannell Kerr Forster are carrying out a tightly focused but detailed study of the BBC's finances to give us the information we need to reach a decision on the appropriate level of funding for the BBC up to 2006. It is not part of Pannell Kerr Forster's terms of reference to take account of views submitted in response to the public consultation or to accept external submissions. We will, of course, be taking account of the views of the commercial broadcasting sector, and everyone else who responded to the public consultation, in reaching our conclusions.

World Cup 2006

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the current situation in respect of England's bid for the 2006 World Cup. [101349]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Government are providing the fullest diplomatic and promotional support for the Football Association's bid to stage the 2006 World Cup. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), in his capacity as the Government's Special Envoy on 2006, was in New Zealand, Thailand and Korea recently with a Football Association delegation to promote the bid. We will continue to do so between now and the decision by the FIFA Executive Committee next July. It is an excellent bid.

In late October, my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham, and myself, met a FIFA Inspection Group. The FIFA delegates, who visited England to inspect the facilities, described England's bid and its stadiums as "outstanding".

Tourism (North-West)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimates he has made of the value of the tourism industry to *(a)* the North West, *(b)* Greater Manchester and *(c)* Bolton in each of the last three years. [101666]

Janet Anderson: Tourism expenditure in *(a)* the North West and *(b)* Greater Manchester by visitors who stayed at least one night is as follows for each of the last three years:

£ million

	1996	*1997*	*1998*
North West	1,850	1,919	1,790
Greater Manchester	413	444	405

Source:
UK Tourism Survey, International Passenger Survey.

Official sources do not provide reliable estimates of tourism expenditure in Bolton or any other sub-county local authority areas.

It is likely that the inclusion of the spending during tourism day visits would at least double these amounts.

James Bond Film

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what location fee was paid to the New Millennium Experience Company by the producers of the film, "The World is not Enough". [101647]

Janet Anderson: A commercial rate was paid to NMEC by the makers of the film. The contractual arrangements reflect normal practice in the commercial sector and are subject to confidentiality requirements applicable to both parties.

Duty Free

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations his Department has received from international tourism organisations on travellers' understanding of the new duty free system. [101629]

Janet Anderson: Since the abolition of duty-free sales to intra-EU travellers on 30 June 1999, my Department has received no representations from international tourism organisations about passengers' understanding of the new successor regime for ships and aircraft. I am advised that Customs and Excise are working very closely with the trade to ease the transition and make sure that accounting arrangements are made as simple as possible.

Religious Organisations (Broadcasting Licences)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his plans to review the law prohibiting religious organisations from holding national radio broadcasting licences. [102215]

Janet Anderson: We are considering the introduction of early broadcasting and communications legislation to ensure that a regulatory framework is in place which recognises the developments across those industries. The ownership of radio licences for religious broadcasting will be one of the issues for consideration in that context.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Nuclear Deterrence Policy

Mr. Tony Benn: To ask the Solicitor-General what advice he has sought on the legality of British nuclear deterrence policy. [102132]

The Solicitor-General: As a matter of convention (observed by successive Governments) neither the substance of the Law Officers' advice on a question, nor the fact that they have been consulted, is disclosed outside Government, other than in exceptional circumstances. I can however confirm that legal considerations are always taken fully into account in the formulation and application of defence policy. The Government are confident that Britain's nuclear policy and posture, as set out most recently in the Strategic Defence Review, are entirely compatible with our obligations under international law.

Mr. Tony Benn: To ask the Solicitor-General what representations he has received about permission for a private prosecution of those responsible within Government for infringements of international humanitarian law based on the Government's nuclear deterrence policy. [102131]

The Solicitor-General: My office receives letters from the public from time to time on the Government's nuclear deterrence policy. A request for permission for a private prosecution under the Geneva Conventions Act 1957 was received last year. However, the Law Officers take the view that the application of the Government's nuclear deterrence policy does not involve an infringement of either domestic or international law, and accordingly permission was not given.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Spending Revisions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 197W, on spending revisions, if he will provide a breakdown of the savings arising from changing disability benefit caseloads broken down between the different disability benefits. [101063]

Mr. Darling: The information is in the table.

The figures are consistent with those published in the November 1999 pre-Budget Report, and show expenditure in Great Britain.

£ million

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Attendance Allowance	–45	–114	–161
Severe Disablement Allowance	–28	–50	–71
Disability Living Allowance	–131	–330	–545
Incapacity Benefit	–47	–90	–142
Total	–250	–585	–920

Notes:
1. The figures may not appear to sum due to rounding.
2. The forecast of expenditure on these benefits has used administrative data newly available since the forecast made for the March 1999 Budget. The new information on awards of the benefits indicated that estimates of future caseload levels should be lower than those underlying the Budget forecast.

Departmental Organisation

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he received the review of the work and organisation of his Department carried out by the permanent secretary at his Department; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [100913]

Mr. Darling: The departmental management study involves a wide-ranging programme of work which it is envisaged will continue for some time. I shall announce the conclusions in due course.

Payment Cards

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library the results of the assessment of the recent Payment Card trials carried out by his Department in the North East and South West of England. [100914]

Mr. Rooker: As part of the BA/POCL project, limited trials of the Benefit Payment Card were conducted with 37,000 customers in 204 post offices in the north east and

south west of England. In the trials, benefit payments were made using plastic magnetic stripe cards, the Benefit Payment Card, instead of outdated paper-based methods of payment. This was supported by a new automated system at post offices. The trials undertaken were limited to Child Benefit and were carried out to provide experience of live running and to inform later stages of the BA/POCL project, including a full scale live trial of all aspects of the Card method of payment and the technology to support it.

The project, which was commissioned in 1996, suffered a series of setbacks and delays and the key milestone of a full scale live trial of the Card was not delivered. There were concerns that the project was too complex and would be undeliverable and in May 1999, the Government announced a new way forward to achieve the original objectives of the project, while simplifying it and reducing risk. Under this approach, the Benefit Payment Card element of the project was removed and, from 2003 DSS will move from paper-based methods of paying benefits to payment by automated credit transfer, a more modern, secure and efficient method of payment.

It was clear that the Benefit Payment Card had added substantially to the complexity of the BA/POCL project, and hence to the delay that had occurred and that its continuation could only increase the risk of further slippage to the programme. There were also increasing concerns that even if the Benefit Payment Card could have been delivered, the magnetic stripe technology on which it was based looked increasingly outdated as banks and others turned their attention increasingly to smart card technology. This, together with the combination of a three year delay to the project and the escalating trend of people opting for payment by ACT, had substantially reduced the role that the Benefit Payment Card could expect to play.

Parental Benefits

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of calculating entitlement to housing benefit and council tax benefit for non-resident parents on the basis of income net of any maintenance they have been assessed as liable to pay under the proposed new child support scheme. [101204]

Angela Eagle: We estimate that the cost of an income disregard for maintenance paid by non-resident parents in Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit would be in the order of £30 million a year.

Notes:

1. Based on data taken from the 1996–97 Family Resources Survey uprated to 2000–2001 prices, benefits and earnings levels.

2. Assumes an October 2001 start date. Caseloads have been projected forward on the basis of actual growth in the CSA caseload between 1996–97 and August 1999, and subsequent forecast growth until October 2001.

3. The cost has been rounded to the nearest £10 million.

4. This cost will include a small element of spousal maintenance, plus child maintenance which is not organised through the CSA.

Students

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what benefits are available to support 19-year-old students who wish to remain in full-time secondary education at *(a)* maintained schools and *(b)* further education colleges. [101665]

Angela Eagle: Most students who are undertaking a full-time course of study, whether in a maintained school, college of further education or elsewhere, are not entitled to benefits as a means of supporting themselves while studying. Primary financial support for students comes from the education student support systems. However, certain students in vulnerable groups, including disabled students and students who are responsible for a child are eligible to claim Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. In addition, partners of students, who are not full-time students themselves, may claim benefits on behalf of the couple, providing they satisfy the relevant criteria.

War Disablement Pensions

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many times over the last five years he has exercised his discretion in granting war disablement pensions in cases where claimants failed to make claims within three months of termination of service. [101667]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of War Pensions Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Gordon Hextall. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Gordon Hextall to Mr. David Crausby, dated 9 December 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked how many times over the last five years he has exercised his discretion in granting war disablement pensions in cases where claimants failed to make claims within three months of termination of service.

The War Pensions Agency does not keep statistics relating to the information that you require. This information could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

It may help if I were to explain that the legislation under which such pensions are awarded is Schedule 3, Article 65 of the Naval, Military and Air Forces (Disablement and Death) Service Pensions Order 1983. This provides that where a claim is not made within 3 months from termination of service, payment of pension shall not be made for any period before the date of claim, unless the Secretary of State's discretion is used.

The Secretary of State's discretion is only used in exceptional circumstances where it is considered reasonable to do so. Examples would be where there has been Departmental error or misdirection, or where the claimant was prevented by illness from, or had some other good reason for, not claiming earlier. The Agency considers the individual merits of each case when considering the claim.

I hope this information is helpful. If you need any further information, I will be happy to assist.

Retirement Pensions

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are currently in receipt of a United Kingdom state pension in *(a)* the USA and *(b)* the EU, excluding the UK; and if he will estimate how many (i) United States citizens and (ii) citizens of the EU, excluding the United Kingdom, who are domiciled in the United Kingdom are in receipt of a retirement pension from their country of origin. [102124]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The number of overseas pensioners who were in receipt of a United Kingdom State Retirement Pension or Widow's Benefit at July 1999 is estimated at 110,000 in the USA and

222,000 in the EU (excluding UK). At September 1999 there were some 23,000 former US residents in the UK receiving US retirement or widow's benefits.

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Benefits (Automated Credit Transfer)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations he has received on the Government's plans for payment of benefits by automated credit transfer. [102238]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) on 6 December 1999, *Official Report,* column 374W.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is his intention that, by 2005, all benefits will be paid into bank accounts through the automated credit transfer system. [102450]

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to ensure that recipients of benefits who do not choose to have benefits paid by automated credit transfer retain the option of payment by order book. [102241]

Mr. Rooker: Starting in 2003 we will be moving to a more modern, secure and efficient method of paying benefits through automated credit transfer (ACT). Payment by ACT will become the norm for paying benefits and the move to ACT will be completed in 2005. However, there will have to be some, limited, exceptions. We have given an assurance that those benefit recipients, whether paid by ACT or otherwise, who wish to collect their benefits in cash at Post Offices, will continue to be able to do so.

Information Technology Services Agency

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the objectives of the strategic outsourcing project of the Information Technology Services Agency. [102422]

Angela Eagle: The Department faces ever more complex business change in order to deliver a modern, responsive welfare service to the public. Key to the successful achievement of the required business change is the provision of modern IT services. In defining the Department's strategic direction, the overall objective has been to achieve a sustainable organisation in support of DSS IS/IT provision which also preserves the best possible career opportunities for staff. We believe that outsourcing the Department's IT provision will provide the best way of delivering its IS/IT needs while securing a better long-term future for it's staff.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102077]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Final consultancy expenditure	*Management consultants*	*IT consultants*	*Total*
1997–98			
Headquarters	448,955.30	1,480,765.97	1,929,712.27
Independent Statutory Body	34,182.70	35,214.33	69,397.03
Benefits Agency	7,749,889.74	3,026,673.24	10,776,562.98
Contributions Agency	196,832.43	433,165.36	629,997.79
Child Support Agency	334,344.96	—	334,344.96
War Pensions Agency	113,646.04	44,714.25	158,360.29
Information Technology Services Agency	2,690,542.90	3,298,078.42	5,988,621.32
Total	11,568,394.07	8,318,602.57	19,886,996.64
1998–99			
Headquarters	2,958,491.58	1,644,500.02	4,602,991.60
Independent Statutory Body	112,130.29	2,240.00	114,370.29
Benefits Agency	7,153,738.38	7,302,862.98	14,456,601.36
Contributions Agency	419,792.10	673,328.50	1,093,120.60
Child Support Agency	198,868.56	0.00	198,868.56
War Pensions Agency	306,915.25	73,326.65	380,241.90
Information Technology Services Agency	1,829,312.36	4,532,311.51	6,361,623.87
Total	12,979,248.52	14,228,569.66	27,207,818.18
1999 to October 1999			
Headquarters	1,822,083.84	313,644.84	2,135,728.68
Independent Statutory Body	21,602.48	0.00	21,602.48
Benefits Agency	10,021,830.60	3,997,569.32	14,019,399.92
Contributions Agency	0.00	0.00	0.00
Child Support Agency	377,982.29	24,490.19	402,472.48
War Pensions Agency	7,699.68	3,808.00	11,507.68
Information Technology Services Agency	854,986.87	1,218,525.51	2,073,512.39
Total	13,106,186.76	5,558,037.87	18,664,223.63

Independent statutory bodies (ISB) breakdown	*Management consultants*	*IT consultants*
1997–98		
The Appeals Service	0.00	0.00
Central Adjudication Service	0.00	0.00
Pensions Ombudsman	0.00	35,214.33
Independent Review Service	34,182.70	0.00
Total	34,182.70	35,214.33
1998–99		
The Appeals Service	0.00	0.00
Central Adjudication Service	0.00	0.00
Pensions Ombudsman	0.00	2,240.00
Independent Review Service	112,130.29	0.00
Total	112,130.29	2,240.00
1999 to October 1999		
The Appeals Service	0.00	0.00
Central Adjudication Service	0.00	0.00
Pensions Ombudsman	0.00	0.00
Independent Review Service	21,602.48	0.00
Total	21,602.48	0.00

Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (OPRA)

Year	*Management consultants*	*IT consultants*
1997–98	377,000.00	395,000.00
1998–99	485,980.83	943,541.52
1999 to October 1999	436,538.98	301,446.39

Note:
OPRA expenditure—(OPRA is classed as an Independent Statutory Body and an executive non-departmental public body. It is not funded directly from vote 3, it is funded by grant in aid).

Housing Benefit

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the total cost was of Housing Benefit in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Scotland in each of the last five years; and what his estimate is of the cost of Housing Benefit in (i) the United Kingdom and (ii) Scotland in each of the next three years. [102381]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Total cost of Housing Benefit in Great Britain and Scotland in each of the last five years and the estimated cost for each of the next three years

£ million cash

	Great Britain	*Scotland*
1994–95	10,103	864
1995–96	10,876	907
1996–97	11,380	967
1997–98	11,180	1,017
1998–99	11,156	1,034
1999–2000	11,485	1,069
2000–01	12,115	1,124
2001–02	12,731	1,177

Notes:
1. The information for 1994–95 to 1997–98 is final outturn, 1998–99 information is estimated outturn and the figures for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 are forecasts.
2. This Department can only provide information on Great Britain. For information about Northern Ireland the hon. Member should refer to the Minister for the Department of Social Development.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many housing benefit recipients there are in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Scotland in (i) council housing, (ii) private rented accommodation, (iii) privately owned accommodation and (iv) other public sector rented accommodation broken down by type; and what proportion this represents in each case of the relevant population. [102383]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Housing benefit recipients in Great Britain and Scotland

Recipients of:	*Great Britain*		*Scotland*	
	Thousand	*Percentage*	*Thousand*	*Percentage*
All housing benefit	4,372	10	518	13
Local authority	2,590	6	383	9
All private (excluding Housing association)	923	2	55	1
Housing association	859	2	80	2

Notes:
1. The figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and percentages to the nearest whole per cent.
2. The percentage quoted is a proportion of the population aged over 16 in the relevant country, and is an estimate based on 1996 mid-year Population estimate figures provided by the Office for National Statistics.
3. Recipients refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.
4. The Question asks for details of how many people in privately owned accommodation receive Housing Benefit. However, people who own their accommodation are not entitled to Housing Benefit.
5. Information is for Great Britain only. For information about Northern Ireland the hon. Member should refer to the Minister for the Department of Social Development.

Source:
Housing Benefit Management Information System, quarterly 100 per cent. caseload counts, taken in February 1999.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the level of housing benefit fraud among benefit claimants living in public sector accommodation. [102384]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is contained in tables 16 and 17 of the Government Statistical Service's report on the methodology and findings of the 1997–98 National Housing Benefit Accuracy Review. The report was published in October 1998 and a copy is available in the Library.

Means-tested Benefits

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what (i) percentage and (ii) number of households in the UK claim one or more *(a)* in-work and *(b)* means-tested benefits. [102246]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Percentage and number of households in Great Britain claiming one or more in-work and means-tested benefit

	Number of households (millions)	*Percentage of private households (Great Britain)*
In-work benefits	1.0	4
Means-tested benefits	6.8	29

Notes:
1. Figures are given at a point in time. For In-work benefits this is May 1998, for estimates for means-tested benefits this is 1997–98 which is the latest information that is available.
2. Means-tested benefits are Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, Social Fund and Back to Work Bonus.
3. In-work benefits are Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Claimants aged 60 or over are only included where the claimant and or partner have earnings (either part-time or full-time) recorded.
4. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred thousand. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.
5. Where benefits overlap, only one benefit has been taken into account.
6. In-work benefit data includes second adult rebate cases.
7. Estimates from the FRS are based on sample counts, which have been adjusted for non response using multipurpose grossing factors that control for region, Council Tax and a number of demographic variables. Estimates are subject to sampling error and to variability in non response.
8. All data relate to Great Britain rather than the United Kingdom as FRS data Cover GB.

Source:
1. Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards
2. Disability Working Allowance 100 per cent. count of claims
3. Housing Benefit Management Information system annual 1 per cent. sample May 1998
4. Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance Family Resources Survey 1997–98

Terminal Illness

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to provide financial support for partners and close relatives of terminally ill people. [102537]

Mr. Bayley: A person who is diagnosed as terminally ill can be awarded, among other benefits, the highest rate care component of Disability Living Allowance or the higher rate of Attendance Allowance. This award may entitle someone caring for that person, including a partner or close relative, to Invalid Care Allowance and, if appropriate the carer premium of Income Support.

The National Carers strategy commits us to keeping financial support for carers under review, which we are doing.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Pakistan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the total value of overseas aid; to what projects such aid is allocated in Pakistan; and if she will make a statement. [102406]

Clare Short: DFID spent £2,354 million on overseas development assistance in the 1998–99 UK Financial year, of which £25.18 million was for Pakistan.

Our bilateral programme to Pakistan targets poverty reduction and improved access by the poor to basic services, such as elementary education and primary health care. Following the military coup on 12 October, I announced a freeze on all direct development assistance to the Government. Our support is continuing through non-governmental channels. These include the Aga Khan Development Network and the Save the Children Fund.

The projects which we are continuing to support include rural development and health programmes for poor communities in Chitral and Northern Areas, and measures to reduce child labour in Sialkot. We have recently allocated £800,000 through a local non-governmental organisation to provide 'micro-credit' for poor women in and around Lahore to improve their income earning opportunities. The full list of projects is as follows:

Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, Chitral District;

Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, Gilgit District;

Primary Health Care Programme, Chitral District;

Family Planning Association of Pakistan: 'Doorsteps' Community Based Family Planning;

Marketing of Hormonal Contraceptives through the Private Sector (Futures Group);

Social Marketing of Condoms (Population Services International);

Family Planning Association of Pakistan: Audio Visual Vans to inform Communities in remote areas;

Pakistan Association for Voluntary Health and Nutrition (PAVHNA): Reproductive Health in Sindh and Punjab;

Protecting the Rights of Working Children in Sialkot, Punjab Province;

Lachi Poverty Reduction Project, North West Frontier Province;

Kashf Foundation: Micro-Credit for Poor Women (Lahore);

Sindh Education Foundation: Community Primary Schools in Sindh Province;

Frontier Education Foundation: Community Primary Schools in North West Frontier Province;

Small Grants Scheme: Miscellaneous small grants to non-government organisations engaged in poverty reduction and human rights.

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of the total workforce in her Department is registered as disabled; and what steps she is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in her Department. [102045]

Clare Short: At present, 1.8 per cent. of staff in my Department have declared a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Our recruitment adverts say that we are committed to a policy of equal opportunities and encourage applicants from all sectors of the community. At the recruitment stage applicants are invited to tell us if they have a disability for which they need reasonable adjustment made during the selection process. We have met all requests so far. We also make adjustments for staff who develop disabilities during the course of their employment with us.

Southern Africa

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to her European counterparts concerning the development of a regional action programme on small arms in Southern Africa. [101929]

Clare Short: DFID funded a seminar last year organised by Saferworld and the South African Institute for Security Studies to consider how to tackle the proliferation of small arms in Southern Africa. The conference was attended by representatives from a number of EU countries and Governments from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region, plus other Governments and organisations interested in small arms proliferation.

Participants identified a number of practical ways in which countries in Southern Africa could co-operate and how the EU might help. Participants agreed an EU/SADC regional action programme which set out four main elements for action, namely measures to combat illicit trafficking including strengthening laws and operational capacity, strengthening regulations on accumulation and transfer of arms, promoting collection and destruction of surplus arms, and enhancing transparency and information exchange on arms issues. The Programme was subsequently endorsed by EU/SADC Ministers in Vienna in November 1998.

I discussed the issue of small arms proliferation with other Development Ministers in the European Council in May this year. The Council subsequently adopted a Resolution on small arms.

Target Strategy Papers

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she will release for consultation the target strategy papers currently being drafted. [102203]

Clare Short: We shall be releasing the Target Strategy Papers individually for external consultation as they become ready. The first paper has just been sent out for consultation and the other will be issued over the next few months.

Civil Society Strengthening

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will set out her Department's strategy on strengthening civil society following the consultation process earlier this year. [102202]

Clare Short: A report on the civil society consultation process was published in February this year.

This led on to the announcement of the launch of The Civil Society Challenge Fund and partnership Programme Agreements. I refer to the answer I gave to the hon. Member on 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 12–13W, which set out the objectives of these mechanisms.

The Guidelines on the Civil Society Challenge Fund were published in September. In my forward I set out the reasons why a strong civil society is a crucial element in the fight against poverty and the importance we attach to strengthening civil society, in both poor and transition countries.

Drugs Control Programme

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how she plans to evaluate the effectiveness of the UN International Drugs Control Programme's drug reduction programme in drug-producing regions. [102494]

Clare Short: My Department routinely monitors and periodically reviews all the major projects we fund to assess their effectiveness, including those managed by the UN International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP). Monitoring and review is systematically undertaken in order to assess DFID-assisted interventions in terms of their relevance, effectiveness and efficiency and, as far as possible, their impact and sustainability. We also subject a small proportion of our projects and programmes to rigorous *ex-post* evaluation. We have also welcomed UNDCP's plans to strengthen their own evaluation and monitoring procedures.

Kashmiri Refugees (Pakistan)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department provides for Kashmiri refugees in Pakistan. [102495]

Clare Short: We are not currently providing any assistance for these refugees, but would be willing to consider doing so if a suitable channel for our funds could be identified. At present, neither the UN High Commissioner for Refugees nor the International Committee of the Red Cross is operating on the Pakistan side of the Line of Control.

So far as bilateral assistance is concerned, our freedom and ability to operate effectively is constrained by the difficult security and other circumstances which prevail there. However, two British non-governmental organisations have been assessing the humanitarian needs in the region, and we await their reports.

HEALTH

National Burn Care Review

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the terms of reference are of the National Burn Care Review. [100497]

Mr. Denham: This is a professionally led review being carried out by the British Burn Association. Copies of the terms of reference have been placed in the Library.

Primary Care

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he will give to primary care groups to ensure that they apply a policy of equal opportunities in their planning and service delivery. [101612]

Mr. Denham: As sub-committees of a health authority, primary care groups are bound to follow the guidelines and legislation set out in respect to equal opportunities. Existing health authority guidance states that services must be equitable, both in terms of accessibility and range, in order to ensure that high standards of care exist across the entire National Health Service.

Primary care trust guidance will be issued shortly, which emphasises PCTs' responsibility to promote equality of opportunity in their treatment of staff and the provision of services to the whole community.

Nursing Vacancies

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* nursing vacancies and *(b)* hard to fill nursing vacancies there are, broken down by region. [101611]

Mr. Denham: The available information is contained in the table.

Department of Health recruitment, retention and vacancies survey
Vacancies in NHS Trusts by region; all nursing staff, including midwifery, as at 31 March 1999

whole time equivalents

	Qualified nurses	
	Total vacancies [1]	*3 month vacancies* [2]
England total	14,950	6,820
Northern and Yorkshire	1,040	390
Trent	930	360
West Midlands	1,530	700
North West	1,640	680
Eastern	1,280	550
London	4,880	2,350
South East	2,620	1,450
South West	1,020	350

whole time equivalents

	Unqualified nurses	
	Total vacancies [1]	*3 month vacancies* [2]
England total	1,170	360
Northern and Yorkshire	120	40
Trent	70	20
West Midlands	120	30
North West	120	30
Eastern	180	30
London	150	60
South East	300	130
South West	100	20

whole time equivalents

	All nurses	
	Total vacancies [1]	*3 month vacancies* [2]
England total	16,120	7,180
Northern and Yorkshire	1,170	420
Trent	1,000	380
West Midlands	1,650	740
North West	1,760	710
Eastern	1,460	580
London	5,030	2,410
South East	2,910	1,570
South West	1,120	360

[1] Posts that Trusts were actively trying to fill at 31 March 1999.
[2] Posts that had been vacant for 3 months or more at 31 March 1999.
Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
Source:
Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey 1999

Hospital Beds

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was *(a)* the minimum and *(b)* the maximum occupancy of intensive care and high dependency beds (i) at the Royal Bolton Hospital and (ii) in each region of England during the winter months of 1998–99. [101676]

Mr. Denham: Available information is the average daily number of available and occupied beds by ward type for each National Health Service Trust. This is published annually in "Bed Availability and Occupancy, England", copies of which are available in the Library. However, as wards classified as "intensive care" may contain high dependency beds and general beds, we have piloted a new census focusing specifically on adult intensive care and high dependency beds. We expect to publish the results shortly.

Runwell Medium Secure Unit

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to close Runwell Medium Secure Unit, Essex; and if he will make a statement. [101734]

Mr. Hutton: Southend Community Care Services National Health Service trust is preparing plans for the reprovision of all services currently on the Runwell Hospital site, including the Medium Secure Unit.

Care Homes

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many professional care workers, care assistants and registered nurses there are in England caring for the elderly outside the NHS. [101897]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally. For directly employed local authority care workers, I refer my hon. Friend to my reply of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 144W. Information is not available on staff working in the independent and voluntary sector or on nursing staff employed by local authorities.

Nurses

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many registered nurses practising outside the NHS have been struck off the national register held by the UK Central Council for Nurses and Midwives and have subsequently been reinstated; and in what time period this reinstatement occurred since the creation of the UK Central Council for Nurses and Midwives for all disciplinary issues and cases involving care of the elderly. [101902]

Mr. Denham: The national register held by the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting does not distinguish between those nurses practising outside the National Health Service and those practising within it.

Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the Government's policy towards treatment for Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy. [102093]

Mr. Hutton: Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP), also known as Factitious Illness by Proxy, is a form of abuse, usually perpetrated against a child. The term refers to a complex range of behaviours in which a person deliberately produces or feigns physical or psychological symptoms in another person who is under the individual's care. Typically the victim is a young child and the perpetrator is the child's mother.

We recognise that suspected cases of MSBP are among the most difficult and demanding areas of activity for paediatricians and other professional groups devoted to child care and protection.

The professionals involved are best placed to decide on the most appropriate means of determining whether MSBP is at issue and, if so, how to act in the best interests of the child and the carer throughout any intervention.

Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients in the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust area have waited more than 18 months for treatment; [101941]

(2) if he will make a statement on the announcement by the North Essex Health Authority concerning patients in the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust area who have waited more than 18 months for treatment; [101939]

(3) what reasons a number of patients in the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust area have been waiting more than 18 months for treatment. [101940]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* As a result of work carried out to review waiting lists and tighten procedures, a number of patients at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust have been identified as waiting over 18 months for treatment as at the end of November 1999.

The figures for November 1999 are not due to be published until the week commencing 10 January 2000. However, Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust, in conjunction with the North Essex Health Authority and the Eastern Regional Office, are taking steps to ensure that patients identified as waiting over 18 months are treated as soon as possible.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he proposes to answer the question tabled by the hon. Member for Waveney on 24 November concerning the terms of reference of the National Burn Care Review (ref. 100497). [102600]

Mr. Denham: I replied to my hon. Friend today at column 50W.

Biomedical Scientists

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the pay scales of trainee biomedical scientists in the NHS. [102346]

Mr. Denham: Biomedical scientists are classed as medical laboratory scientific officers (MLSOs) for pay and grading purposes. Their pay scales are attached to a common pay spine for National Health Service professional and technical staff. The current pay scale for trainee MLSOs, effective since 1 December 1998 is:

Spine point	£
00	7,476
01	7,726
02	7,988
03	8,260
04	8,544
05	8,839
06	9,146
07	9,463
08	9,796

Pay is negotiated in the Professional and Technical Staffs Whitley Council. The staff side is consulting their members on the NHS management side's offer of:

An increase in national pay scales for professional and technical B staff of 3 per cent.

An increase of 13.5 per cent. in London Weighting Allowances which will restore them to 1995 values.

Additional increases for staff working in cytology screening, with trainee cytology screeners getting 6.6 per cent. and qualified cytology screeners getting up to 11.4 per cent.

Additional increases for staff in the MLSO grades, with trainee MLSOs getting up to 26 per cent., and MLSO1s and some MLSO2s getting 7.1 per cent.

If accepted this offer would produce a new pay scale for trainee MLSOs effective from 1 April 1999 of:

Spine point	£
00	9,420
01	9,747
02	10,090
03	10,443

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many biomedical scientists are employed in each NHS hospital trust; and at what grade. [102303]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what educational and training qualifications biomedical scientists require to gain state registration. [102347]

Mr. Denham: The title "state registered biomedical scientist" is not protected in law. Most biomedical scientists become state registered as medical laboratory technicians following acquisition of an approved honours degree in biomedical science and a minimum of one year's practical training in an approved laboratory. The approval of courses, qualifications and institutions for the purpose of state registration as a medical laboratory technician is a matter for the Medical Laboratory Technicians Board of the Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine.

Social Care Staff

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what safety training is mandatory for social care staff. [102386]

Mr. Hutton: Social care employers are under a duty to ensure that their staff are trained to lift properly and to use any equipment that is regulated by the Health and Safety Executive. The Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services will incorporate health and safety issues in the new induction training it is preparing to be made available for all social care staff.

Social Workers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many incidents of violence have been recorded against social workers in each of the last five years; what measures his Department takes to monitor such incidents; and what plans he has to review the monitoring process. [102385]

Mr. Hutton: Information about the number of incidents of violence against social workers is not collected centrally. However, we are determined to reduce substantially the incidence of violence towards everyone working in social care. We have set up a taskforce to produce a national action plan by November 2000 with recommendations and timescales for action to reduce violence against social care staff and to promote the safety and welfare of social care workers.

In particular, the taskforce will advise the Department on the setting of targets that social care employers will be set for the reduction of violence against social care staff, and the arrangements for monitoring progress. They will also advise social care employers on the development, implementation and monitoring of strategies to reduce violence, to train the workforce in handling confrontational situations, and to support staff who have been the victims of violent incidents.

Social Service Authorities

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what basis, and on what assessment of performance, each of the local social service authorities were identified for special Government scrutiny; and in what form, and over what period, this scrutiny is to take place. [102421]

Mr. Hutton: There are 17 local social service authorities which are the subject of special monitoring arrangements by the Department's Social Services Inspectorate (SSI). Of these, five received adverse joint review reports; nine received adverse SSI inspection reports and three received an adverse external inquiry report into their care practices.

These authorities have been on the monitored list from between 2 and a half years and one month. All authorities are required to develop an action plan to resolve the problems which resulted in their being monitored by the SSI.

All 17 authorities will continue to receive special monitoring until further inspections and other assessments of their performance indicate that the requirements for improvements in their action plans have been met and that the changes are sustainable.

Children (Leaving Care) Bill

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of extending eligibility as defined in Clause 1 of the Children (Leaving Care) Bill [*Lords*] to young people up to the age of 21 years. [102201]

Mr. Hutton: It is essential that any new duties introduced through the Children (Leaving Care) Bill are fully and properly funded as part of our commitment to improving the life chances of these young people. Work is currently under way to estimate the costs of extending assistance to young people up to the age of 21.

Referring to the duty to assess and meet the needs of young people in and leaving care, our response to the Children's Safeguards Review stated

"the Government is also minded to extend this duty until the young person reaches the age of 21. However, it will first study the costs, limitations and affordability of doing so".

We remain committed to extending the duty to 18–21-year-old care leavers when finances allow. The Children (Leaving Care) Bill makes provision for this at Section 24A 4(a).

Health and Social Care Concordat

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the health and social care concordat. [102693]

Mr. Milburn: The text of the Health and Social Care Concordat which will guide the work of officials has been agreed with the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, without prejudice to the position of the Northern Ireland Executive Committee. Copies were placed in the Library on 9 December.

Children's Homes (Regulation)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his progress towards regulating children's homes where four or fewer children are accommodated. [102213]

Mr. Hutton: We introduced the Care Standards Bill on 2 December into another place. Clause 38 of the Bill is intended to amend the Children Act 1989 to allow local authorities to extend regulation to small homes which are currently not registered or inspected. These are small private children's homes which accommodate fewer than four children.

Home Chiropody Services

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the provision of home chiropody services by health authorities in England and Wales. [102214]

Mr. Hutton: It is the responsibility of individual health authorities in England and Wales to assess the broad health care needs of their population, and to secure a range of hospital and community health services such as home chiropody services to meet those needs. Decisions about health care and the use of resources are best taken at local level because it is there that people's needs are best known and services can be tailored accordingly.

Correspondence

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department will reply to the letter of the hon. Member for Witney of 5 May regarding a constituent, Dr. Kate Cropper. [102191]

Ms Stuart: I replied to the hon. Member on 8 December.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if any of the field trials in the UK of GM maize crops during 1999 under part C of Council Directive 90/220/EEC have not appeared on the DETR public register for GMO releases. [101716]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

A Part C consent for cultivation of a GM crop, issued under EU Directive 90/220/EEC, permits growing anywhere within the geographical region specified in the consent. There is no formal requirement to notify the locations of where the crop is being grown.

AgrEvo holds a Part C consent for cultivation of GM maize (Ref: C/F/95/12/07). Information on field trials of this maize has not been placed on the statutory public register, as there is no requirement to do so. However, information on the locations of the farm-scale evaluations has been published by my Department.

PRIME MINISTER

Appointments (Religion)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the *(a)* disbarments and *(b)* special requirements based on religion relating to appointment to positions within the Government and to functions carried out by Government Ministers. [99809]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* Special requirements apply to certain functions carried out by the Prime Minister, the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in relation to some Church of England appointments. If any of the first three of these are either Roman Catholic or Jewish, his or her ecclesiastical functions are carried out by another Minister; in the same circumstances it has been customary for the Chancellor of the Duchy's functions to be carried out by the Clerk of the Council.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the impact of the Statute Repeals Act 1989 on his ability to appoint individuals to positions within the Government on the basis of their profession of the Jewish religion. [99657]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* I am not aware that the impact of the Statute Repeals Act 1989 has any effect on my ability to appoint individuals to positions within the Government on the basis of their profession of the Jewish religion.

Royal Family

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to seek to amend the law to *(a)* allow members of the Royal family to marry a Catholic without losing their right to inherit the throne and *(b)* allow Roman Catholics to inherit the throne; and if he will make a statement. [99658]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* The Government have always stood firmly against discrimination in all its forms, including against Roman Catholics, and it will continue to do so.

The Government have a heavy legislative programme aimed at delivering key manifesto commitments in areas such as health, education, crime and reform of the welfare system. To bring about change to the law on succession would be a complex undertaking involving amendment or repeal of a number of items of related legislation, as well as requiring the consent of legislatures of member nations of the Commonwealth. It would raise other major constitutional issues. The Government have no plans to legislate in this area.

Galileo Project

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on Government policy towards the Galileo project; what is the assessed cost of the project; what representations he has received on the issue; what is the current status of the project; for what reasons it had been rejected by the Council; and if he will make a statement. [101015]

The Prime Minister: The Transport Council of the European Union, at its meeting in June, adopted a Resolution which invited the European Commission to proceed with the definition phase of Galileo in conjunction with member states and the European Space Agency. This work has begun. The Commission is required to put forward proposals to the Council on the best way to proceed with the project either independently or in co-operation with international partners by the end of 2000.

The cost of the project is estimated to be at least £2 billion but the definition phase work will help to clarify the overall cost and the arrangements for a possible public-private partnership to fund these.

Following the consultation exercise the Government believe further analysis needs to be done on issues such as cost, the public-private partnership, benefits to users and security arrangements. The work now being undertaken by the Commission should enable decisions on the best way forward to be taken.

Cologne Council

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the discussions held between the European Council and President-nominate Prodi at the Cologne Council on 3 June; what were the questions raised; if he will deposit the presentation on the future Commission's work and reform programme in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [101016]

The Prime Minister: At the Cologne European Council, President Prodi outlined his intention to implement far reaching reform of the Commission. This will include improved financial and personnel management, a better standard of integrity and a clearer

division of responsibilities. The Commission will publish a full programme for reform in early 2000. This will be deposited in the Library in due course.

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister for what reason the mandate of the forthcoming intergovernmental conference was set at consideration of the voting mechanics of the European Council and size of the Commission; if policy areas may also be negotiated; which policy areas he called for negotiations to cover; and if he will make a statement. [101023]

The Prime Minister: The Cologne European Council agreed that next year's IGC should deal with the institutional reforms necessary for the next enlargement of the Union. The Government welcome this. Enlargement is not just about the applicant countries preparing for accession, but also about the EU preparing to receive them.

As for specifying agenda items, Cologne agreed that the IGC should focus on three key issues: the size and composition of the Commission, the reweighting of votes in the Council and a possible extension of QMV. Some related items may be added to the agenda, but these too should focus on institutional, not policy, issues.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister what the budget is of the Performance and Innovation Unit's for *(a)* the current financial year and *(b)* for each future year for which budgets for the unit have been set. [101174]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Performance and Innovation Units's budget for 1999–2000 is £2,243,000. Future years' budgets have not been set.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister how many staff there were in the Performance and Innovation Unit in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; and what plans he has for future staffing levels in the period 2000 to 2002. [101175]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* I announced the setting up of the Performance and Innovation Unit on 28 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 132–34W. The Unit was fully up and running by early 1999. Staff numbers will vary depending upon the number of projects under way and the size of the teams. Staff numbers, on a whole-time basis, were 36 at the end of 1998 and are expected to be 51 at the end of 1999. Future staffing levels will depend upon future projects.

Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister when the last meeting of the Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee was; and if he will publish its agenda and minutes. [101501]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 362W.

Helsinki Council

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the documents relating to authority for further policy commitment, or action, able to be given approval at the European Council Meeting at Helsinki on 10 and 11 December, indicating the parliamentary scrutiny to which the documents were subject in each case. [101616]

The Prime Minister: All appropriate documents are submitted for parliamentary scrutiny in accordance with the guidelines for scrutiny of European Union business.

Special Advisers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister how many special advisers are employed in 10 Downing Street. [101454]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Twenty-five, one of whom is part-time and unpaid.

Interdepartmental Ministerial Group on Animal Issues

Mr. Gray: To ask the Prime Minister (1) how often the Interdepartmental Ministerial Group on Animal Issues has met in the past year; [101747]

(2) which is the lead Department for the Interdepartmental Ministerial Group on Animal Issues; and which Department provides the secretariat for this group; [101850]

(3) which Ministers are represented on the Interdepartmental Ministerial Group on Animal Issues; [101746]

(4) on how many occasions the Interdepartmental Ministerial Group on Animal Issues has discussed equine issues; and if he will indicate the specific issues discussed. [101849]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Ministers from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Home Office and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food have twice met informally to take forward preparations for the Interdepartmental Ministerial Group on Animal Welfare. An announcement of the membership and remit of the Group, and of how it will take account of UK-wide animal welfare responsibilities, will be made as soon as possible.

Chinese Embassy Bombing (Belgrade)

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Prime Minister if he has received from the United States an explanation of the circumstances surrounding the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on 7 April; and if he will make a statement. [102058]

The Prime Minister: The circumstances which led to the accidental strike against the Chinese Embassy on 7 May were considered in detail by NATO at the time.

State Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister if, when Her Majesty the Queen makes a state visit overseas, she does so in her capacity as Head of State of the United Kingdom as well as in her capacity as Head of State of the other Commonwealth countries of which she is Queen. [101404]

The Prime Minister: The British Government advise The Queen to undertake State Visits as Head of State of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister if Her Majesty the Queen welcomed the President of China to London in her capacity as Head of State of the United Kingdom or as Head of State of all the Commonwealth countries of which she is Head of State; and if he will make a statement. [101405]

The Prime Minister: The British Government advised The Queen, as Head of State of the United Kingdom, to invite the President of the People's Republic of China on a State Visit to Britain.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Concrete

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives he is pursuing to help concrete manufacturers search for alternative fuels. [100035]

Mr. Mullin: The Government recognise that using high calorific value wastes to replace conventional fuels in industrial processes can deliver benefits, where it is the best practicable environmental option for the waste stream. The use of alternative fuels must also meet stringent environmental controls under Integrated Pollution Control.

The use of alternative fuels on cement kilns must represent the best available techniques not entailing excessive cost. Trials of alternative fuels are regulated by the Agency under the Substitute Fuels Protocol, which sets out detailed requirements for emissions monitoring and public consultation. If trials are successful, the Environment Agency issues authorisations which set stringent emissions limits on emissions to all environmental media, so as to protect human health and the environment.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the number of homes each year which will be removed from fuel poverty by the Government's policies; [100824]

(2) what estimate he has made of the length of time required for the Government's programmes to end fuel poverty; [100823]

(3) what assessment he has made of the cost of eradicating fuel poverty. [100825]

Mr. Meacher: Households who would require to spend more than 10 per cent. of their total households income on fuel in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime are commonly regarded as being fuel poor. 4.3 million households in England in 1996 were in this situation.

The Government's New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme is designed to treat 460,000 households between now and April 2002 at a cost of £260 million for these years. These households should be substantially moved away from fuel poverty.

In addition an unknown number of households will be taken out of fuel poverty as a result of other programmes including the liberalisation of the energy markets and the energy efficiency standards of performance schemes (EESOPs) which are being extended to gas suppliers and customers in the New Year.

The inter-Ministerial group chaired jointly by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe and my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will consider the impact of these programmes. The group will then seek to develop a more accurate picture of the extent of the problem, how quickly it can be addressed, and at what cost, so that a target date can be set for the elimination of fuel poverty in England. Some of the policy initiatives in this area, such as the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, are devolved functions. Therefore a target date for Scotland and Wales would be a matter for the Parliament and Assembly respectively.

A41 (Aylesbury)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his latest estimate of the average number of vehicles using the *(a)* A41 ring road, Aylesbury, and *(b)* A41 Bicester road, Aylesbury (i) each day and (ii) during peak hours. [101118]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Richard Thorndike, on behalf of Mr. Peter Nutt, to Mr. David Lidington, dated 13 December 1999:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, Keith Hill, to reply to your recent parliamentary question about the latest estimates of the average number of vehicles using the A41 ring road, Aylesbury and the A41 Bicester Road, Aylesbury. I am replying in the absence of the Chief Executive, Peter Nutt.

The following figures were recorded in June 1999. The Highways Agency has a traffic counter in Friarage Road, and this recorded an average two-way traffic flow of 30,676 vehicles per day. The highest hourly flows were 2,655 vehicles between 8.00am and 9.00am, and 2,442 between 5.00pm and 6.00pm both during the week. There are no counters on Bicester Road, but the closest on the A41 is near Fleet Marston approximately 1 mile away. This recorded two-way flows of 15,041 vehicles per day, and the highest weekday hourly flows were 1,437 vehicles and 1,466 vehicles, again between 8.00am and 9.00am and 5.00pm and 6.00pm respectively.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to what extent public transport services will be reduced in London as a result of arrangements for public transport to the Millennium Dome. [101158]

Mr. Hill: There will be no reduction in public transport. On the contrary, the extended Jubilee Line, new river services and new bus services will enhance public transport provision in the capital city. The maximum number of visitors attending a single session at the

Millennium Dome will be 35,000, which equates to less than 1 per cent. of the passenger traffic in the capital on any weekday morning.

There are many potential choices of mode and route for journeys to the Dome from within the London area. These journeys are therefore expected to be accommodated with only minimum impact on the capital's public transport system. Around 60 per cent. of visitors are expected to arrive at the Dome on the new extended Jubilee Line, which has sufficient capacity to carry up to 24,000 people per hour. A further 14 per cent. are expected to arrive on either the new river or Millennium Transit bus services, which are being introduced as part of the Millennium Experience Transport Strategy.

Ladbroke Grove

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the rail layout at Ladbroke Grove was designed, approved and installed. [101596]

Mr. Hill: The track layout at Ladbroke Grove is part of a larger scheme extending from Paddington station to past the Heathrow Airport turnoff at Airport Junction. The layout was designed and installed during the late 1980s and early 1990s by British Railways. The works were staged over a number of years and railway privatisation occurred during that time. The works included Airport Junction and electrification on the overhead line system for Heathrow Express. Statutory approval by Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI) matched the stage at which the works had reached. Some of the works were approved but approval of the signalling was not completed before the accident at Southall occurred. After the Southall accident the remaining signalling approval was held in abeyance by HMRI pending the findings of the public inquiry.

Concessionary Fares

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will encourage local authorities which do not currently run concessionary fares schemes to visit those which do. [101688]

Mr. Hill: This is a matter for the local authorities concerned, though it would always seem sensible for local authorities to consider whether they might usefully draw on the experience of others.

Rail Services (Northampton/Euston)

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress on his discussions with Railtrack on the protection of access for local rail services between Northampton and Euston following the upgrade of the West Coast main line. [101490]

Mr. Hill: The Rail Regulator is consulting on a draft order which, if confirmed, would require Railtrack to complete by the end of February 2000 various strategic reviews, including one of the scope for faster services between Euston and Northampton following the upgrade of the West Coast Main Line. The review is intended to provide sufficient information to enable train operators and the shadow Strategic Rail Authority (sSRA) to take informed decisions on the existing access arrangements and on the potential for improved services.

GM Farm-scale Trials

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the requirements are for informing the public of the existence of GM farm-scale trials in their area; and if he will make a statement. [101718]

Mr. Meacher: In the case of consents for crops in the farm-scale evaluation programme issued in conformity with Directive 90/220/EEC Part B (ie research and development consents), there is a requirement under the GMO legislation to make available the locations of the sites. These are held on a public register, and advertisements are placed in the local press. For crops which have approval for Part C consent (ie placing on the market), under the GMO legislation there is no requirement for companies to make the locations of these sites publicly available. At the present time, this applies to herbicide tolerant maize within the farm-scale evaluations. However, the locations of all fields within the farm-scale evaluations are notified to my Department, and the Department makes the information available to the public, including via the DETR website.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many representations he has received against GM farm-scale trials in each month from 1992; and if he will make a statement. [101715]

Mr. Meacher: I announced the setting up of the farm-scale evaluation programme in October 1998. Since then, approximately 4,400 letters from members of the public have been received across the whole range of biotechnology issues. My Department does not classify these according to individual subject, but I estimate that approximately one third of these are concerned with the farm scale evaluations programme. I have received approximately 260 representations concerned with the farm-scale evaluations from Members of Parliament. In addition, approximately 36,550 representations have been received to date through campaigns and signatures on petitions. My Department is still receiving individual representations.

Pesticides Tax

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the reduction in pesticides use which will be achieved as a result of the Government's proposed pesticides tax. [101831]

Mr. Meacher: The Government published a consultants' report in March this year on the design of a tax or charge scheme for pesticides which contained estimates of the reduction in pesticide use which might be expected under various assumptions. No decision has been taken yet on whether to proceed with a tax. The current position is set out in the Chancellor's November Pre-Budget Report.

Carbon Monoxide Emissions

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the reduction in carbon monoxide emissions over a 10-year period that would be achieved by replacing two 1200MW coal-fired power stations with two gas-fired power stations of the same capacity. [101832]

Mr. Meacher: The amount of carbon monoxide emitted over a 10-year period will depend on a number of factors including, critically, the number of hours that the plant will operate over that time. For this reason an answer in tonnage cannot be given. We might expect, however, that a combined cycle gas turbine power station would emit approximately 5 per cent. of the carbon monoxide a similar capacity and similarly loaded coal-fired power station would. In total, power stations contribute only 1 per cent. to total carbon monoxide emissions in the UK.

Trains (Telephone Links)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is a requirement that all trains be equipped with telephones that are operational at all times. [101482]

Mr. Hill: It is not a requirement that all trains be equipped with telephones that are operational at all times. The provision of telephones for passenger use is, along with other facilities provided on trains, a commercial matter for the train operating company concerned.

Most trains are fitted with radio communication systems to enable contact with signalling or control centres by train crew. In areas where the ability of radio communication systems to reliably operate is restricted or possibly not available at all, line side telephone equipment is available.

Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will carry out a full investigation of the operation of the Marine Rescue Co-ordination Centre, Dover, having particular regard to the adequacy of *(a)* physical and *(b)* human resources at the time of maximum communications traffic in the operation of the Channel Navigation Information Service. [101823]

Mr. Hill: There is no perceived basis for an investigation into the physical or human resources at the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre at Dover in the operation of the Channel Navigation Information Service.

The physical and human resources required to execute the tasks of the Centre are adequate for its primary role of search and rescue and the Channel Navigation Information Service roles.

At times of maximum communications traffic, exceptionally, ships may experience a wait of no more than ten minutes. This has no effect on the safe navigation of vessels within the Dover Strait.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what additional resources are to be made available at the Marine Rescue Co-ordination Centre, Dover, following the suspension of the Channel Navigation Information Service, on 24 August; [101825]

(2) what assessment he has made of the dangers to shipping as a consequence of suspension of the Channel Navigation Information Service at the Marine Rescue Co-ordination Centre, Dover. [101824]

Mr. Hill: The Channel Navigation Information Service at the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre in Dover has not been suspended. Therefore, there have been no dangers caused to shipping as a consequence.

The responsibility for the safe navigation of vessels passing through or across the Dover Strait remains with the Masters of those vessels. The recently introduced mandatory reporting requirements for vessels of 300 gross tons or more is a means of assisting French and British coastguards in identifying vessels should they fail to comply with international regulations for preventing collisions at sea, specifically Rule 10 which covers the use of Traffic Separation Schemes.

The very brief, rare and temporary suspension of the mandatory reporting, not the Channel Navigation Information Service, following the serious collision between the Norwegian Dream and Ever Decent on 24 August 1999 did not endanger shipping within the Straits of Dover.

Ivanhoe Line

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has held with Leicestershire County Council about the extension of the Ivanhoe Line rail service. [101442]

Mr. Hill: None. However, the shadow Strategic Rail Authority met with Leicestershire County Council on 23 September to discuss rail service development plans for Leicester and Leicestershire. Leicestershire County Council indicated that they would submit two bids early in the new year under the Rail Passenger Partnership scheme, one of which was Stage two of the Ivanhoe Line.

A6 Bus Lane

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the A6 bus lane in Loughborough during its trial period. [101440]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Andrew Reed, dated 13 December 1999:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, Keith Hill, to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the bus lane on the A6 in Loughborough.

Proposals for a busy lane on the A6 between Quorn and Loughborough were developed by the Agency and the Loughborough Bus Partnership.

Following public consultation on the proposals in October 1998, the bus lane was introduced on an experimental basis in March 1999.

The results have been encouraging. Bus journey time reliability has improved in the morning peak, maximum queue lengths have been reduced, traffic flows have improved and car journey times at

the height of the morning peak have improved. If you require any further details on the results gathered to date please contact Peter Adams, Project Manager for the scheme, on telephone number 0121 678 8215.

We have consulted with the local authorities and the police about the future of the bus lane and are minded to make it permanent. This would require the publication of draft Orders, on which the public may make representations.

We expect to announce a decision early next year and I shall write to you again nearer the time.

Drink Driving

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the drink driving rehabilitation scheme; and what plans he has to extend it to other parts of the country. [101919]

Mr. Hill: The experimental rehabilitation scheme for drink drive offenders has been running since 1993 and 175 court areas are currently designated to refer offenders to courses. Research carried out for the Department has shown that those who attend a rehabilitation course are three times less likely to reoffend than those who do not. Having now been approved by both Houses of Parliament, the scheme will be made permanent and will operate throughout Great Britain from 1 January 2000. We are issuing guidance about the scheme to all course providers and to the courts, and will place a copy in the Library of both Houses.

Thatched Roofs

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action the Government are taking to ensure that those who have houses with thatched roofs are able to maintain and keep the thatch. [101892]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department has supported research in collaboration with the industry which has provided guidance on the use of thatch, on growing, selection, performance, best practice and fire safety. English Heritage has helped to develop various publications on thatch and a new publication "Thatch and Thatching", aimed at providing user-friendly guidance, will be published very shortly. English Heritage is also running exhibitions and half day conferences for thatchers and local authority planning officers starting early in the new year.

A12

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the five worst accident blackspots on the A12 in Essex. [101847]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Bernard Jenkin, dated 13 December 1999:

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Keith Hill, has asked me to write in response to your recent written Parliament Question about the five worst accident black spots on the A12 in Essex.

The following table lists the sites which have the highest level of recorded personal injury accidents over the 3 years ending June 1999.

Location	*No. of Accidents*
A12 Junction with B1024 South Slip Roads at Kelvedon	9
A12 South Slips at junction with A1023/B1002 Mountnessing	8
A12 Junction with B1024 North Slip Roads at Kelvedon	8
A12 Junction with B1389 South Slip Road at Witham	8
A12 400 metres north of Lynfields Bridge, Witham	8

The Highways Agency does not keep records where damage is to the vehicle only.

If you would like further information please contact Simon Amor, the Route Manager for the A12, telephone 01234 796173.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many persons have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* seriously injured on the A12 in Essex in each of the past 10 years; and what is the corresponding figure in the current year so far. [101848]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The information requested is shown in the table.

Casualties on the A12 in Essex: 1989–98

Year	*Casualties*		
	Fatal	*Serious*	*All*
1989	12	46	347
1990	9	43	340
1991	15	47	357
1992	5	37	273
1993	9	60	307
1994	3	42	323
1995	2	39	235
1996	12	48	277
1997	7	62	333
1998	6	35	256

Data for 1999 are not available yet.

Land Reclamation Programme

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will allow parish councils to apply for grants under the Land Reclamation Programme; [101956]

(2) what factors underlay the decision to restrict the granting of and application for grants under the Land Reclamation Programme to district and county councils. [101955]

Mr. Mullin: The Land Reclamation Programme (LRP) provides funding to local authorities to enable them to reclaim derelict land where there is no incentive for the private sector to undertake the task, typically because the land has no immediate prospect of development. LRP meets 100 per cent. of the approved eligible cost of approved projects because local authorities do not receive central government funding specifically for land reclamation. The widely accepted definition of local authority used for the purposes of LRP includes district, county and unitary authorities but excludes parish councils.

The vast majority of LRP projects have been promoted by local authorities within the context of an agreed land reclamation strategy for their area. They have therefore, on the whole, been large projects, which require intensive professional administration. It is unlikely that most parish councils would have the resources to manage such projects. However, a parish council can ask a borough, district or county council to champion a scheme on their behalf.

LRP is now administered by the Regional Development Agencies (RDA) and paid for from physical regeneration budgets.

Local Government Bill

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish draft regulations on each of the matters for which powers to make regulations will be conferred on him under the Local Government Bill [Lords]. [102089]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions indicated during the Second Reading of the Local Government Bill in another place that, as our response to the report of the Joint Committee indicates, draft regulations concerned with executive functions, policy framework and petitions will be available in time for Committee stage in the upper House. Draft of other regulations and key statutory guidance will be produced during the passage of the Bill.

The Government's response to the Joint Committee's report on the draft Local Government (Organisation and Standards) Bill (Cm 4529), which preceded the current legislation, was published on 2 December and has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish a regulatory impact assessment in respect of the Local Government Bill [Lords]. [101951]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Explanatory Notes to the Local Government Bill, which were published along with the Bill on 26 November, make it clear that none of the measures under Parts I-IV of the Bill will impose any burden on business, charities or voluntary bodies.

The provisions on welfare services in Part V will not in themselves impose any direct burden on such organisations, but the new arrangements for funding support services that the Government intend to implement through the new provisions will have implications for service providers. Elements of the new arrangements to scrutinise value for money more closely and which will separate the funding of accommodation and support services to improve service flexibility may involve additional management and administration for some service providers. This will be a factor that will need to be taken into account both locally and centrally.

A copy of the Regulatory Impact Assessment is available from my Department.

Charter of Local Self-Government

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the Government's policy in respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government; [101952]

(2) what assessment he has made of the conformity of the Local Government Bill [Lords] with the European Charter of Local Self-Government; and if he will make a statement. [101953]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Our policy on the European Charter of Local Self-Government is set out in the Explanatory Memorandum which we laid before the House on 2 March 1998, prior to ratification of the Charter on 24 April 1998. As made clear in that Memorandum, our intention, which we are satisfied the Local Government Bill fulfils, was that any future legislation affecting local government should further strengthen the degree of compliance with aspects of the Charter and ensure continued compatibility with its provisions.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out in the case of farm-scale trials of genetically modified crops *(a)* with which party those farmers hosting the trials have a contract, *(b)* what fees and compensation payments are involved, *(c)* what protocols have been agreed for growing the crops, *(d)* what arrangements have been made for access to the farms for research or publicity purposes, *(e)* what are the procedures for harvesting the crop and *(f)* what are the procedures for destroying the crop after harvest. [101755]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* *(a)* Farmers have contracts with member organisations of the industry biotechnology body SCIMAC (supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops) which hold consents for the release to the environment of GM crops for the purpose of the farm-scale evaluations.

(b) Under the renewed agreement with industry announced on 5 November covering the conduct of the farm-scale evaluations, no direct commercial benefit will be sought by the consent holders from the plantings or obtained from use of the crops during the farm-scale evaluation period. Our understanding is that the farmers growing the crops in the farm-scale evaluations are likely to be compensated by the consent holders; that would be a matter for them.

(c) The crops are grown according to a Government-endorsed industry code (the SCIMAC code), which sets out best practice in planting, managing and using GM crops.

(d) The independent contractors conducting the biodiversity research through the farm-scale evaluations have all necessary access to the farms. Other research on the crops may be allowed where this does not conflict with the primary purpose of the farm-scale evaluations to investigate their effects on biodiversity: research on gene

flow has been added in this way. We are unaware of any other arrangements for access to the farms for publicity; that would be a matter for the farmers.

(e) Crops are harvested according to the conditions of the consent issued under Directive 90/220/EEC, and procedures in the SCIMAC code.

(f) The fate of the crops is set out in the consents for growing them and the approvals for use of pesticide. In the unlikely event that any of the crops within the farm-scale evaluations obtain full regulatory clearance to enter the UK food or feed chain during the farm-scale evaluation period, the produce would be used within identity-preserved channels.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will outline the circumstances which he has identified whereby a crop from a GM farm-scale trial could enter the human or animal food chain; and what procedures there are for ensuring identity preservation and labelling of such crops and products of livestock fed on such crops. [101756]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The circumstances whereby a crop from a GM farm-scale evaluation could enter the human or animal food chain are when it has received food and feedstuffs approval through the EU regulatory system, and where a pesticide has been applied, approval under the UK pesticide regulations. The crops will be grown in accordance with the SCIMAC guidelines which ensure segregation and identity preservation on the farm. Currently, none of the GM crops within the farm-scale evaluations have all the necessary approvals to enter the UK food or feed chain. Should any of the crops receive full clearance during the farm-scale evaluation period the produce, to ensure consumer choice can at all times be respected, would be used within identity-preserved channels. This would include any products reaching the consumer from livestock fed on such crops. The particular procedures chosen to achieve this, including labelling, would be established at the appropriate time.

LSVT

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to reform the voting rights of council tenants under large-scale voluntary transfers. [102063]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* None. Although a ballot is not a statutory requirement, the best way of assessing the level of tenant support for a proposed transfer is a properly conducted formal ballot of all secure and introductory tenants who will be affected.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102071]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Estimated expenditure on external consultants and advisers by the Agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions since May 1997 to 30 November 1999 is as follows.

£ million

Year	*Agencies* [1]	*NDPB's*
1997–98	8.1	21.2
1998–99	14.3	23.1
1999–2000 (to date)	10.8	22.5

[1] Figures for Agencies excludes the Highways Agency programme consultancy expenditure related to work on the road network.

London Underground

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent to date on *(a)* legal, *(b)* financial and *(c)* other consultancy costs for the London Underground public-private partnership for each of the three proposed infrastructure companies. [102247]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 430–31W.

Housing

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the Government intend to deal with future housing allocations in local authority areas which have no brownfield sites left. [102217]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The amounts of previously developed land will differ between local authority areas but all authorities will be expected to contribute as far as possible to achievement of regional and the national 60 per cent. target for recycling land and buildings, and to set their own targets accordingly.

Hedges

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to change the planning regulations on permitted development rights relating to the inserting of windows into existing walls of properties, in connection with the plans to control the height of hedges and other such trees; and if he will make a statement; [102211]

(2) what plans he has to bring the height of hedges and similar trees under planning law; and if he will make a statement. [102212]

Mr. Mullin: Last month my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment launched a consultation paper asking people for their views on possible solutions to the problems caused by high hedges. The consultation paper includes the report of a study, carried out by officials, which looked at the scale and nature of the problems and the effectiveness of a range of options for dealing with them. The study suggested that bringing the height of hedges under planning law might be disproportionate because it would not be targeted on hedges which were causing problems. It would also have other practical difficulties.

The study did not consider changing planning regulations on permitted development rights relating to the inserting of windows into existing walls of properties.

We hope as many people as possible will respond to the consultation to help us decide whether more should be done to relieve this source of long-running and distressing neighbourhood disputes.

Planning

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change planning law to enable a third party to appeal to the Secretary of State against a planning decision made by the local authority; and if he will make a statement. [102207]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government have no current plans to introduce a right of appeal for third parties.

It is the responsibility of local planning authorities to act in the general public interest when determining planning applications. Local authorities must determine applications in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Such considerations can include views expressed by local residents and other third parties.

The scope for third parties to participate fully in the development control process has been increased in recent years, through the statutory requirements to consult on the preparation of the development plan and to publicise all planning applications.

Business Rates

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the amount of the business rate carried forward from the 1999–2000 to the 2000–01 local government settlement. [102518]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The basis for the calculation of the distributable amount of non-domestic rates for 2000–01 is set out in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) on 9 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 604W. In arriving at the distributable amount we have estimated that there will be a cumulative surplus of £1,058 million from the pooling of non-domestic rates and redistribution to Local Authorities in England.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was collected in business rates from businesses in *(a)* Gloucestershire, *(b)* Tewkesbury and *(c)* Cheltenham in the last three years for which figures are available; and how much he expects will be collected in 1999–2000 and 2000–01. [102208]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The amount of business rates collected by each shire district in Gloucestershire for the last three years is shown in the table, together with the estimated net yield for 1999–2000. Information for 2000–01 is not yet available.

£000

	Business rate receipts [1] for 1996–97	Business rate receipts for 1997–98	Business rate receipts for 1998–99	Net yield for 1999–2000 [2]
Cheltenham	27,196	27,123	28,686	27,776
Cotswold	11,189	12,132	12,947	12,657
Forest of Dean	7,330	7,403	7,730	7,723
Gloucester	26,621	28,772	30,061	28,861
Stroud	12,848	13,373	14,683	14,631
Tewkesbury	11,147	11,876	12,462	12,229

[1] All business rate receipts are in respect of the year shown.
[2] The figure represents the gross yield reduced for mandatory relief, discretionary relief and transitional relief, but does not take into account any allowances for losses in collection and cost of collection. It was estimated just prior to the start of the financial year forming the provisional contribution made by the authorities to the business pool rate.

TREASURY

Employment

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many households which had no one in employment on 1 May 1997 now have a member of the family in paid employment. [101308]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Murphy, dated 13 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question asking how many formerly workless households now have at least one person in employment.

The ONS collects information about workless households via the Labour Force Survey. ONS analyses are based on working age workless households, which are defined as households where there is at least one person of working age and no household members are employed. Although estimates of the total numbers of such households are available on a half-yearly basis the ONS cannot accurately identify how many households have changed status from workless to working or vice versa; only the net change is available.

The ONS estimates that between spring (March to May) 1997 and spring 1999 there was a net fall of 106,000 in the number of workless working age households (from 3,281,000 to 3,175,000).

Income Tax

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the case of a single person starting work on 1 January earning *(a)* (i) 50 per cent. and (ii) 75 per cent. of average earnings, *(b)* average earnings, *(c)* 150 per cent., *(d)* 200 per cent., *(e)* 300 per cent. and *(f)* 400 per cent. of average earnings, how much income tax that person would pay over a working lifetime of 40 years based on current rates of income tax and assuming an annual increase in average earnings of 2 per cent. per annum. [101949]

Dawn Primarolo: A reliable estimate could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mortgages

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many domestic mortgages, underwritten

with endowment policies, matured with a shortfall in the sum insured in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, and *(d)* 1998. [102153]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information could be obtained only from the endowment providers. To collect such information would entail disproportionate costs.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if the Financial Services Authority will regulate buy-to-let mortgages; [102509]

(2) what is his timetable for announcing the outcome of his consultation on the regulation of mortgages. [102508]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Following consultation, the Treasury is in the process of reaching a decision on whether statutory regulation would best protect the interests of consumers and the Treasury will make an announcement in due course.

Euro

Mr. Howard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate how much the United Kingdom would have lost through the decline in the value of the euro if it had joined economic and monetary union on 1 January, taking into account the obligation of member states to contribute *(a)* to the establishment of the initial share capital of the European Central Bank and *(b)* to the exchange reserves of the ECB; and if he will set out the assumptions made in calculating the answer. [102603]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The United Kingdom did not join the single currency on 1 January 1999 so therefore the circumstances did not arise.

Gold Reserves

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to what extent the sales of gold reserves by the Bank of England are intended as a contribution towards the stability of bullion banks. [102148]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The gold sales are part of a technical restructuring of the UK's foreign currency and gold reserves to achieve a better balance in the portfolio by diversifying more widely and not being over exposed to one asset.

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for how many central banks the Bank of England acts as a depository for the leasing of their gold reserves. [102150]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Details of any arrangements the Bank of England has with other central banks are commercially confidential.

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what criteria the Treasury will judge the success or failure of its policy to sell 415 tonnes of the gold reserves. [102151]

Miss Melanie Johnson: By achieving a better balance in the portfolio these sales will enable the Treasury to meet one of its performance targets of

> "minimising the cost of holding the Government's foreign currency reserves, while reducing risk".

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much gold has been sold by the Bank of England since he instructed the Bank to undertake such sales; and what was the average price per ounce received from each such sale. [102069]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The results of the gold auctions held on 7 July 1999, 21 September 1999 and 29 November 1999 are published in Bank of England Press Notices issued on those days. Copies of the Press Notices are available in the House of Commons Library.

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if 40 per cent. of the proceeds from the gold sales by the Bank of England have been put into the Euro; and at what prices. [102149]

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total amount of euro-based currencies acquired by the Bank of England since the initiation of gold sales; and what was the average price per euro in each such purchase. [102070]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The proceeds from sales of gold have been invested in interest bearing foreign currency assets in broadly the same proportion as currently held in the net foreign currency reserves (40 per cent. dollars; 40 per cent. euro; and 20 per cent. yen). Table 2 of the Quarterly Report on UK Official Holdings of Foreign Currency and Gold for the period July to September 1999, published on 2 December provides a breakdown of the size and composition of the United Kingdom's reserve holdings.

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102051]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The old system of registration of disabled people ended when the employment provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 came into force on 2 December 1996. People who were registered as disabled on that date were given protection under the Act for a further three years, and into the future if they continued to meet the definition of disability contained in the Act. So employers, including the Chancellor's Departments now need to identify staff who might be covered by the employment provisions of the Act, rather than whether or not they were formerly registered as disabled. Current records show that about 4 per cent. of staff in the Treasury and Customs and 3.9 per cent. of staff in Inland Revenue have a disability as defined in the Act.

Each Department has a variety of measures in place to ensure equal treatment for disabled people, and to ensure that they meet their legal obligations to protect disabled people from discrimination in the field of employment.

EU Accounts

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy in relation to the European Court of Auditors' rejection of the European Union's accounts for 1997. [102179]

Miss Melanie Johnson: In its Annual Report, the European Court of Auditors declined to give a positive statement of assurance on the EU accounts for 1997, and again on the accounts for 1998, because of the level of errors detected in payment transactions. This is clearly unacceptable and the Government will press the Commission and other Member States to take action. The Government strongly encourages and supports measures to reduce financial mismanagement and fraud against the EU budget. The Government has strongly backed Commission reform and expects the new Commission under Romano Prodi's presidency to act decisively.

Early Retirement (Stress)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is taking to reduce the number of workers in the public sector taking early retirement on the ground of stress; and if he will make a statement. [102399]

Mr. Andrew Smith: In August this year my predecessor announced that he had set up a wide ranging review into the level of ill health retirement in the public sector. The terms of reference for the review are:

"To review the factors leading to ill health retirement, including why its incidence is much higher in some parts of the public sector and in some employing authorities than others;

To identify best practice both in the management of pension scheme provisions and the operation of relevant human resource policies; and

To make recommendations to Ministers on the implementation of measures to spread best practice and to ensure the appropriate use of ill health retirement benefits."

The contribution which stress related illness makes to the level of ill health retirement, and the measures which might be taken to reduce its incidence, is being considered in the review.

The review is due to report early in 2000.

EU Budget

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on *(a)* the net and gross contribution figures to the EU Budget listed in Table 3 of HM Treasury White Paper, European Community Finances (Cm 4382) and *(b)* the ONS UK Balance of Payments 1999 edition, Table 9.2 and Table 9.7. [102350]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Table 3 of the annual White Paper European Community Finances provides details, by calendar year, of UK contributions to, and public sector receipts from, the EU Budget broken down by the various elements. In particular, Cm 4382 contains outturn information in respect of years 1996 to 1998 and an estimate for 1999.

Section 9 of the ONS Pink Book presents a geographical breakdown of the current account of the balance of payments. Table 9.2 includes total UK current account credits and debits with EU Institutions, including trade in service receipts and balance of payments income transactions as well as official transfers to, and from, EU Institutions. Table 9.7 includes the total current account transfers to, and from, EU Institutions.

Thus the coverage of Table 3 of the White Paper and Section 9 of the Pink Book are different. The White Paper covers all public sector payments to, and receipts from, the EU while the Pink Book also includes balance of payments transactions between EU Institutions and UK companies. However, Tables 3.11, 5.1 and 6.1 of the Pink Book record receipts from, and payments to, EU Institutions and are comparable in coverage to the White Paper net contribution figures.

Fuel Prices

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual increase in VAT income generated by each 1p increase in the pump price of fuel following an increase in crude oil prices; and what total increase he estimates will arise from such price increases in the current financial year. [102170]

Mr. Timms: The estimated increase in VAT revenues from road fuels resulting from a 1p per litre increase in pump prices is around £50 million. However the net effect on total VAT revenues of recent increases in pump prices is likely to be small as the additional expenditure on road fuels will have been offset by reduced expenditure on other VATable products.

Amusement Machines

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to review the licence duty for amusement machines. [102181]

Mr. Timms: The Government keep duty rates under constant review.

Revenue Estimates

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what basis he has *(a)* reduced his second year revenue estimate from £375 million to £300 million and *(b)* maintained the first year revenue estimate at £475 million. [101816]

Dawn Primarolo: There has been no such reduction. The £300 million the right hon. Gentleman refers to is a full year cost for what will eventually be raised each year from this measure. It is not comparable to the first year cost shown in the 1999 Financial Statement and Budget Report.

National Changeover Plan

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the cost of the Government's National Changeover plan to date. [101820]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear in his statement to the House on 23 February 1999, *Official Report*, columns 179–96, and repeated on 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 824–26, we may spend some tens of millions of pounds. Any such expenditure would be required mainly in the DSS, Inland Revenue and Customs where the scale and complexity of their computer systems makes advance preparations critical so that we can maintain the flexibility for Britain to make any changeover as cost-effectively as possible.

Land Settlement Tenants

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will meet the Chairman of the Inland Revenue and hon. Members representing former land settlement tenants to seek to establish a resolution to the tax issues relating to their compensation agreed with the Ministry of Agriculture in 1991. [102569]

Dawn Primarolo: A meeting would not be appropriate.

Representations have been made querying the raising of tax charges by the Inland Revenue in respect of out of court compensation paid by MAFF to a number of former tenants of the Land Settlement Association, but it has been made clear that Ministers do not intervene in individual cases. The Inland Revenue's independence from Treasury Ministers in the handling of individuals' affairs must be scrupulously observed. Where disputes continue between taxpayers and the Revenue it is for the Appeal Commissioners and the courts to determine how the law is to be applied.

Tax Rates

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have benefited from the 10p tax rate in each constituency. [102596]

Dawn Primarolo: Almost all of the individual income taxpayers in each constituency are benefiting from the 10p tax rate.

Statistics Commission

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what terms of reference will be given to the proposed Statistics Commission; to which Minister it will report; and if he will make a statement. [102237]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The White Paper "Building Trust in Statistics", published in October (Cm 4412), outlined the role that the proposed Statistics Commission will play in advising on the scope, quality and priority-setting for National Statistics.

More detail on the roles and responsibilities of all the key players in National Statistics, including the Statistics Commission, will be set out in a Framework for National Statistics, which the Government intend to publish as soon as possible.

Income Drawdown

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to redefine the income limits for an individual to take income drawdown from a personal pension fund. [102187]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 78W.

Limb Deficiency

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his Department's classification is for recording children born with limb deficiency. [102317]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger, on behalf Dr. Holt, to Mr. Andrew George, dated 9 December 1999:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the classification of limb deficiency. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

The National Congenital Anomaly System, based at the ONS, codes all anomalies using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). The version currently being used is the 10th revision. The codes that cover limb reduction defects are:

Q71 Reduction defects of upper limb

Q72 Reduction defects of lower limb

Q73 Reduction defects of unspecified limb

The ONS also provides data on selected congenital anomalies to the International Clearinghouse for Birth Defects Monitoring Systems. For limb reduction defects, the classification used is based on the text description provided to the National Congenital Anomaly System. Each defect is manually classified as upper, lower or both (upper and lower) and as:

a. transverse: absence of limbs and digits (excluding thumb and little finger)

b. preaxial: absence or partial absence of thumb/radius/tibia

c. postaxial: absence or partial absence of little finger/ulna/fibula

d. intercalary: absence of the limbs with hand or foot intact

e. mixed: presence of more than one type of limb defect.

CO_2 Reduction Targets

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what study Her Majesty's Treasury has made of the reductions in carbon dioxide emissions already achieved by firms which will be affected by the climate change levy; and if those firms with significant recent reductions will be granted lower reduction targets. [101828]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

Extensive analyses of energy use and carbon dioxide emissions within industry have been carried out on behalf of the Government by the Energy Technology Support Unit (ETSU). These studies estimate the potential for future energy efficiency improvements by industry sectors. The Building Research Establishment has undertaken similar research for building sectors.

Targets for energy intensive firms which wish to enter into agreements with the Government are being negotiated on the basis of the potential for further cost-effective energy efficiency improvements. Those firms which are already relatively efficient will be expected to make fewer energy savings than those firms which still have substantial scope for further energy efficiency improvements.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Pre-school Learning

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out in respect of each education authority area the percentage of three-year-olds whose pre-school learning is being funded by his Department in the current financial year under the scheme announced in December 1998. [98589]

Ms Hodge: The Government are making available £390 million over three years to increase the number of free, good quality, early education places for three-year-olds. 190,000 new free places will be made available, which will mean 66 per cent. of three-year-olds will be able to access a free place by March 2002. In 1999–2000, around £40 million of this additional funding will be allocated to 57 Local Education Authorities with the highest levels of social need. The following table shows, by Local Education Authority, the percentage of three-year-olds that are expected to be funded through nursery education grant in this financial year. In addition, Local Education Authorities are also funding a proportion of three-year-olds via their Standard Spending Assessment allocations. This percentage is also shown. From April 2000, funding for additional new free places will be distributed across all Local Education Authorities.

The 57 local education authorities receiving nursery education grant for 3-year-olds in 1999–2000

Percentage

	Percentage of children receiving nursery education grant	*Current percentage of children receiving free early education (via Standard Spending Assessment)*	*Total participation of three-year-olds in free early education in 1999–2000*
Barking and Dagenham	12.9	69.1	81.9
Barnsley	30.8	48.5	79.3
Birmingham	39.4	49.0	88.5
Blackburn with Darwen	26.7	41.3	67.9
Blackpool	60.6	17.3	77.9
Bolton	20.4	59.3	79.7
Bradford	16.9	66.4	83.3
Brent	30.5	51.2	81.7
Camden	39.0	41.7	80.7
County Durham	5.5	71.4	76.9
Coventry	31.9	49.4	81.3
Doncaster	16.6	64.1	80.7
Ealing	10.5	69.2	79.7
Gateshead	25.7	55.1	80.7
Greenwich	26.0	58.3	84.2
Hackney	41.8	44.6	86.4
Halton	36.8	43.3	80.2
Hammersmith and Fulham	29.0	51.5	80.5
Haringey	22.2	61.3	83.5
Hartlepool	3.0	97.0	100.0
Hounslow	8.7	55.8	64.5
Islington	37.6	45.3	82.9
Kingston upon Hull	13.9	69.0	82.9
Knowsley	3.0	94.3	97.4
Lambeth	39.9	45.0	84.9
Leeds	13.5	65.7	79.2
Leicester	31.1	52.0	83.1
Lewisham	42.7	40.2	82.9
Liverpool	20.2	69.8	90.0
Manchester	10.2	79.7	89.9
Middlesbrough	3.0	97.0	100.0
Newcastle upon Tyne	25.4	58.5	83.9
Newham	38.3	49.8	88.1
North East Lincolnshire	30.0	46.6	76.5
North Tyneside	3.0	78.8	81.8
Nottingham	24.5	60.0	84.6
Oldham	34.0	48.5	82.5
Redcar and Cleveland	3.0	97.0	100.0
Rochdale	31.2	51.2	82.4
Rotherham	37.1	40.9	78.0
Salford	5.5	77.2	82.7
Sandwell	11.5	76.5	88.0
Sheffield	39.9	42.1	82.0
South Tyneside	3.8	76.7	80.5
Southwark	25.2	60.2	85.4
St. Helens	12.5	46.4	58.9
Stockton-on-Tees	3.0	97.0	100.0
Stoke-on-Trent	14.1	64.9	79.0
Sunderland	14.0	69.2	83.2
Tameside	20.7	57.0	77.7
Tower Hamlets	9.3	76.6	85.9
Wakefield	14.1	62.3	76.4
Walsall	3.0	88.1	91.1
Waltham Forest	45.5	35.2	80.7
Wandsworth	39.5	39.3	78.8
Wirral	35.5	42.2	77.7
Wolverhampton	3.0	80.9	83.9

Pupil Expulsions (Easington)

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils have been excluded and expelled and from which schools in the Easington district council area year-by-year since 1995 for drug related offences. [101428]

Jacqui Smith: Information on exclusions from individual schools as a result of drugs related offences has not been held centrally.

However, for the first time, the Department has recently been surveying local education authorities about the levels of drug related permanent and fixed period exclusions which arose in their schools during the academic year 1998–99. The data are being collected at local education authority area level so information on individual schools or district councils will not be available.

Cromwell School, Tameside

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress he is making with Tameside MBC in discussions on re-locating Cromwell School. [101447]

Jacqui Smith: Tameside local education authority has served a statutory notice, under section 339 of the Education Act 1996, to make prescribed alterations to Cromwell School, Thornley Lane South, Denton. Cromwell is a mixed day school for pupils with severe learning difficulties which is currently approved for 60 pupils aged 12–19.

Tameside proposes to:

re-locate the school onto a new site adjacent to Dukinfield Astley High School;

increase the school's size to make provision for 70 pupils;

reduce the school's age range to 11–16—students between 16 and 19 would attend Tameside College.

If approved, the proposals would affect post-16 students from September 2000, pupils between 11 and 16 from September 2001.

Officials from the Department will be meeting those from Tameside this week to discuss the proposals.

Learning Difficulties

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements he has made for ensuring that trainee teachers have the necessary competence to identify pupils with specific learning difficulties. [101468]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The National Standards for Qualified Teacher Status reflect the Secretary of State's requirement for Qualified Teacher Status as set out in the DfEE Circular 4/98. The standards apply to all trainees seeking Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and should be met by those to be assessed for QTS from May 1998. Successful completion of a course or programme of initial teacher training (ITT), including employment based provision, must require the trainee to achieve all these standards. All courses must involve the assessment of all trainees against all the standards specified. Qualified Teacher Status is a requirement for all those who teach in a maintained school.

The National Standards require all newly qualified teachers to demonstrate that they can identify pupils who have special educational needs, including specific learning difficulties; know where to get help in order to give positive and targeted support; and are familiar with the Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs and, as part of their responsibilities under the Code, implement and keep records on individual education plans (IEPs) with pupils at stage 2 of the Code and above.

Children's Education

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he is undertaking to encourage links between schools, communities and families in educating children; and if he will make a statement. [101086]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* We recognise the vital role parents and the wider community can play in supporting children's learning. We have already introduced home-school agreements as one way of fostering a positive, forward-looking partnership between parents and teachers and recently launched a new website for parents. We also announced a "Parents Guide to the National Curriculum" to help them understand what their children are learning and how they can help. In addition, we are piloting National Curriculum topic leaflets for parents and a magazine containing practical tips and information. We also know that the family literacy and numeracy programmes we fund through local authorities can be effective in drawing into learning adults with low basic skills. This is particularly the case for parents who missed out at school, but whose concern for their children can renew interest in their own learning. This will be supported this year by £6 million from the Standards Fund, increasing to £7 million next year, to reach 20,000 parents and their children.

We are also working with others to increase parental involvement. For example, we have been working with the Community Education Development Centre (CEDC) to develop the SHARE project which supports parents in helping their children at home with reading; Parentline Plus have been looking at the feasibility of a new service for parents to help with their children's homework; and we have asked the Institute for Public Policy Research to explore further ways of developing family involvement in children's education and look more widely at extending family involvement in enrichment activities. We are working with Age Concern to extend their Trans-Age grandparent mentoring scheme to secondary schools; and the National Mentoring Network to engage older people with young people in school through mentoring and literacy programmes.

In the new year, the CEDC, partly funded by the DfEE, will publish practical advice to schools on how to develop as a community resource. We are also considering the recommendations in the report of the Schools Plus Policy Action Team on how activities such as study support, involving parents in their children's education, and engagement of the wider community can help reduce failure in the most disadvantaged areas.

Higher Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment further to his answer of 23 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 79–80W, on higher education funding, whether the higher education funding bodies for the United Kingdom apply the same degrees of selectivity in funding based on their common research assessment. [101706]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* While the funding councils all use the research assessment exercise output to fund research selectively, they differ slightly in the degree of selectivity they apply because each of the funding bodies uses a slightly different funding model (except DENI institutions are funded via the HEFCE model).

A comparison of HEFCE, SHEFC and HEFCW research selectivity, 1999–2000 Research Allocations

	Rating transformations		
HEFCE/DENI	*SHEFC*	*HEFCW*	
3b-1	3b-1	3b-1	Quality driven component (principal funding and QR funding)
3a-1.5	3a-1.55	3a-1.4	
4–2.25	4–2.4	4–1.96	
5–3.375	5/5*-3.72	5–2.744	
5*-4.05	—	5*-3.293	
(50% increase for each point from 3b to 5, and 20% premium for 5*)	(55% increase for each point from 3b to 5, 5* level with 5)	(40% increase for each point from 3b to 5, and 20% premium for 5*)	

Note:
Table prepared by HEFCE Analytical Services Group—RAE ratings are from 5* down to 1, with 5* being the highest, 1 the lowest. Ratings 1 and 2 receive no funding.

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the *(a)* responsibilities of and *(b)* operational relationships between regional development agencies and (i) the Learning and Skills Council and (ii) local learning and skills councils. [101654]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* The White Paper "Learning to Succeed" set out the proposed functions of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and its relationship with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs).

RDAs will be represented on both the national LSC and local Councils. At both national and local level the LSC and RDAs will share information to ensure that the national skills agenda and local LSC plans are developed with reference to regional priorities and skills strategies. RDAs will also be invited to comment on local LSC plans, and the extent to which they reflect regional learning and skill needs. RDAs and the LSC will also work together to develop skills packages for regional inward investment programmes.

We will shortly publish a document setting out the Government's plans for implementing the proposals in the White Paper. The document will outline how the new arrangements will work and set out the next steps for implementation.

New Deal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of additionality in each of the New Deal schemes. [102106]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* New Deal is a long-term programme, still in its early days. Consequently, most evaluation is still in progress and is yet to report. Employment Service Research report ESR13, published in March 1999 and available in the Library, gives an initial summary of progress on the New Deal for young unemployed, produced by the Institute for Employment Studies. It reports evidence of a positive effect on outflows of young people from unemployment into jobs as a result of the New Deal. Further quantitative evaluation on the impact of New Deal for young unemployed is likely to be published shortly and will also be placed in the Library.

There is a comprehensive evaluation programme in place for all elements of New Deal. The article "New Deal for the young unemployed: monitoring and evaluation", published in Labour Market Trends in November 1998, sets out a strategy which is broadly common across New Deal.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the impact on the unemployment count of those people who were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance prior to participating on the New Deal for 18–24 year-olds and the New Deal for people aged 25-plus, and who have since ceased their claim as a result of leaving the gateway of the respective scheme for *(a)* an option and *(b)* claiming a benefit other than Jobseeker's Allowance. [102114]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* There is a comprehensive evaluation programme in place for the New Deal for young unemployed and New Deal for long term unemployed adults. It will be addressing issues such as this but, since New Deal itself is still in its very early stages, much evaluation is in progress and is yet to report. Early quantitative evaluation on the impact of New Deal for young unemployed is likely to be published shortly and will be placed in the Library.

Skills Improvement

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to help businesses ensure that employees have the skills required to exploit modern communications and electronics. [100555]

Mr. Wicks: *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* This Department funds a number of initiatives to help individuals and businesses acquire the skills needed to exploit information and communications technologies (ICT). The University for Industry (UfI) will offer new learning opportunities to individuals and businesses when it is launched in Autumn 2000—one of its priorities is ICT for the workplace. My Department is putting in place a network of up to 700 ICT Learning Centres to enable adults in the most disadvantaged areas to have access to ICT-based learning. There are a number of relevant employer-led National Training Organisations supported by my Department which offer help to employers. The IT, Communications and Electronics Skills Strategy Group, chaired by Alan Stevens, has produced a report containing options for further action in this area. We shall respond to it shortly. In addition, the Department of Trade and Industry provides support through the Information Society Initiative which aims to raise awareness, and use, of IT and related technologies amongst businesses.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have had an application for an individual learning account refused; and for what reasons. [102314]

Mr. Wicks: This year TECs/CCTEs in England have been operating local arrangements to provide individual learning accounts in advance of the national framework which will come in next year. Information is not held centrally on the number of applications refused or the reasons for the refusal. In advance of the national framework TECs/CCTEs have only been asked to provide limited numbers of accounts in 1999–2000.

External Assessors

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to which unit of his Department the external assessors employed as part of the proposed threshold arrangements for teachers will be allocated; what their management structure will be; and how many will be employed on *(a)* permanent and *(b)* fixed-term contracts. [102615]

Ms Estelle Morris: External assessors will be employed by the organisation to which DfEE awards the contract for their recruitment, deployment and quality assurance. Management structure and contractual arrangements will depend upon the award of this contract. When let, the contract will be managed by DfEE's Teachers' Pay and Policy Division.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many external assessors will be employed under the proposed threshold arrangements for teachers; and what the budget is for these staff. [102614]

Ms Estelle Morris: The deployment and remuneration of external assessors will be a matter for the organisation to which DfEE awards the contract for their management. This contract has not yet been awarded and so information on numbers and costs is not yet available.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Animal Remains (Fuel)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in which EU member states animal remains are used as a fuel in cement kilns; and if he will make a statement. [100576]

Ms Quin: This Department does not hold information on this issue.

Incineration Plants

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what plans he has to approve further loans from the Intervention Board to companies for the purpose of converting existing incineration plants to take *(a)* meat and bone meal and *(b)* cattle carcases; [100828]

(2) what the total value was of the loan made by the Intervention Board to Fibrogen Ltd. to fund the conversion of an existing incineration plant to take meat and bone meal. [100832]

Ms Quin: The Intervention Board's contract with Fibrogen is to incinerate 255,000 tonnes of meat and bone meal (MBM) from the Over-Thirty-Month-Scheme over a three year period at a total cost of some £16 million. Under the terms of the contract, the Government have agreed to advance part of the gate fee payable for the incineration service. The amount involved is £5.7 million, with a contingency of a further £0.5 million, to meet the cost of converting the power station and to meet the Environment Agency's requirement. The cost to the taxpayer of the advance, estimated to be £4 a tonne over the contract quantity of MBM, was fully considered in awarding the contract to Fibrogen. Even taking into account the cost of the advance, Fibrogen's gate fee to burn MBM is significantly below that negotiated with other incineration companies.

The Intervention Board has now contracted, or there is available commercially, sufficient capacity to meet its future incineration requirements, and it is unlikely that there will be a need for other contracts with advance funding.

Food Labelling

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to improve the clarity and accuracy of country-of-origin labelling of food products in supermarkets. [100794]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* We are consulting all interested parties on guidance aimed at ensuring that country of origin markings on food labels do not mislead consumers about the true origin of the ingredients that have been used. We also intend to promote changes to European and international rules and advice to ensure that consumers are given accurate information about the true origin of the foods they are buying.

Meat Industry

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the report of the Meat Industry Red Tape Working Group. [102771]

Mr. Nick Brown: I have just received the report of the Meat Industry Red Tape Working Group and I am immediately placing copies in the Libraries of the House.

I am very grateful to the Working Group for their hard work in completing their report so quickly. I asked them to think radically and to suggest ways of doing things better. I note that a key recommendation is to modernise the approach to safeguarding meat hygiene to match the advances in food hygiene science. This supports the contention we have held for some time that the system, much of which is the subject of EU legislation, needs revision to ensure that it is effective and streamlined but at the same time provides the fullest safeguards for consumers. The Report makes a considerable number of other recommendations for both short and long term action. I shall therefore be considering the report very carefully with my colleagues. We will give our considered response in the New Year.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how much his Department spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997 funded from (i) his Department's programme provision and (ii) the Lord Chancellor's Department's running costs. [99487]

Mr. Lock *[pursuant to his reply, 24 November 1999, c.147W]:* I regret to inform the hon. Member that the answer given was inaccurate. This was due to a misinterpretation of the figures collated to answer the question.

The correct figures are as follows:

Expenditure for the Department from April 1997 to end of October 1999 is £9,082,480.

£129,974 of this has been spent from programmed provision and the remainder from running costs.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102072]

Mr. Lock: The total expenditure on external consultants by the Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies from April 1997 to end of October 1999 is £7,540,453.

Judiciary (Training)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what training is being given to the judiciary on the implications for their work of the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into United Kingdom law. [102067]

Jane Kennedy: Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board (JSB) which is an independent non-departmental public body and is chaired by Lord Justice Waller.

Between January and July 2000 the JSB will be holding a series of 58 one-day seminars on the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European Convention on Human Rights for all judges (including those who sit part-time) from District Judge level to the Court of Appeal.

In addition the JSB is holding a series of after-court seminars at the Royal Courts of Justice for the senior judiciary. The first of these seminars was held in May 1999 and the series will continue during 2000.

CABINET OFFICE

IT Initiatives

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to extend the initiatives based on the use of IT to improve public services set up by her Department to other parts of the country. [101915]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are committed to ensuring that the benefits of new technology are shared by the many not just the few. As a result we are working to extend our vision of Information Age Government, as set out in the "Modernising Government" White Paper, in close co-operation with the Devolved Administrations as well as local government.

Earlier this year we invited the Scottish Executive, the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Central IT Unit and the Local Government Association to nominate representatives to act as their Information Age Government Champions (IAGC). This is the Group charged with driving forward our Information Age Government agenda across the public sector.

We have also established a new body, the Central Local Information Age Forum, which includes representatives from central and local government from across the whole of the United Kingdom. The Forum, which met for the first time in November, will encourage innovation and co-operation between central and local service providers and help to drive up technology standards.

SCOTLAND

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102098]

Dr. Reid: Expenditure by Executive Agencies of the Scottish Office since May 1997 is estimated as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	0.7
1998–99	0.7
1999–2000	0.4

These figures were included in the estimated total for the Scottish Office given in my answer of 10 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 626W. Figures for the current financial year do not include spending since 1 July onwards, as this is now a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Information on NDPBs of the Scottish Office is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 14 December 1999

DEFENCE

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy in respect of the storage on private land of nuclear weapons by companies involved in their manufacture. [102524]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 7 December 1999, *Official Report,* column 457W. Nuclear weapons are constructed on Ministry of Defence land and remain in the ownership of the Ministry of Defence at all times.

Mr. Tony Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what briefing the United Kingdom Government have received from the US Government on their sub-critical nuclear test programme. [102128]

Mr. Hoon: Under the auspices of the 1958 UK/US Mutual Defence Agreement the UK and the US have regular exchanges on aspects of nuclear warhead stockpile stewardship. These have included briefings on the scope and outcome of US sub-critical experiments carried out at the nevada Test Site. Precise details of these exchanges are being withheld under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Apache Helicopter

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects *(a)* the first Apache helicopter to be flying in the United Kingdom and *(b)* the first squadron to be available for deployment on operations. [101861]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The first WAH-64 Apache helicopter flew in the UK on 26 August 1999. Several trial flights have been conducted since. The nine aircraft required to equip the first squadron are expected to be delivered by December 2000. There will then follow a period of training after which the squadron will be ready for deployment.

Kosovo

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which NATO multiple-role aircraft took part in both combat air patrols and ground attack missions over Kosovo. [102248]

Mr. Hoon: No Royal Navy or Royal Air Force aircraft were dual-roled for combat air patrols and ground attack missions during the Kosovo air campaign.

Although I can confirm that a number of NATO aircraft committed to Op Allied Force did have a multi-role capability, given the size and complexity of the operation it is not possible to provide details of which NATO multiple role aircraft took part in both combat air patrols and ground attack missions over Kosovo.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Leisure and Tourism (River Thames)

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what qualifications or experience each of the senior managers of London River Services have relating to the provision of leisure and tourism services on the River Thames; [102117]

(2) what independent economic studies have been undertaken to assess the impact on the leisure and tourism industry of the reintroduction of river bus services on the River Thames. [102120]

Mr. Hill: The promotion of the River Thames for tourism and leisure purposes is an important part of our objective of improving and enhancing the use of the river. London Transport's subsidiary, London River Services Ltd. (LRS), has done excellent work in taking forward this objective and I am confident that it fully shares our appreciation of the role of the importance of continuing to provide high quality services for tourists. In this context my hon. Friend may wish to note that LRS is now seeking membership of the London Tourist Board in its own right.

The management team of LRS has extensive experience and expertise in the tourism and leisure markets and LRS is also able to draw on London Transport's experience and specialist staff.

It is for LRS to decide whether it needs independent advice on the implications of individual licence applications for new services. However, I understand that it has in place measures to evaluate the impact on existing operations before new licences are awarded.

Housing Green Paper

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the Housing Green Paper. [102030]

Mr. Mullin: We intend to publish a Housing Policy Green Paper in due course. The Green Paper will build on our achievements in housing to ensure that everyone is offered the opportunity of a decent home and so promote social cohesion, well-being and self-dependence.

Council Leaders (Criminal Offences)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by *(a)* name, *(b)* local authority and *(c)* political party those local council leaders who have been (i) charged with and (ii) convicted of criminal offences since 1997. [101966]

Ms Beverley Hughes: This information is not held centrally. We have introduced in the other place a Bill to set up a new tough ethical regime, complimenting the criminal justice system, which will ensure the highest standards of conduct in local government in England and Wales.

Ghana

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what

(a) ministerial and *(b)* official visits to Ghana have been undertaken by his Department in each of the last five years. [101973]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* There have been four such visits:

In May 1995, two officials visited Ghana for Air Services Talks;

In 1996, one official undertook a visit to assess how the host state was assisting UK carriers in meeting their security obligations;

In May 1997, two officials visited Ghana for Air Services Talks;

In September 1999 the Minister for the Environment and two officials attended the North-South Environment Ministers meeting at Elmina.

Solar Heating Panels

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of houses constructed in the last five years which contain solar heating panels; and if he will make a statement. [102353]

Mr. Mullin: Detailed information of this kind is not held centrally. We understand that, in total, around 2,000 solar heating systems per year are typically being installed throughout the UK. My Department's Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme, in encouraging good building design, advocates the incorporation of solar heating in appropriate cases. And the Department of Trade and Industry is working closely with the Solar Trade Association and others to promote good practice, to disseminate well-informed advice about solar heating and to support appropriate training.

Bus Services

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to require bus companies to run services on public holidays; and if he will make a statement. [102178]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State has no such powers. The majority of bus services outside London are operated commercially by private bus operators. Levels of service are partly a matter for operators, subject to the requirement that local bus services must be registered in advance with the Traffic Commissioner; he can take action against any operators who fail to run their services as registered. However, local authorities have the powers to let subsidy contracts for the provision of services which are not being provided commercially (on public holidays or otherwise) but which they judge to be socially necessary.

Singapore Airlines

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the reason is for the length of time taken to respond to Singapore Airlines' request for fifth freedom rights from London Heathrow airport; and if he will make a statement. [102686]

Mr. Mullin: At the bilateral negotiations which took place in February 1999 my officials confirmed that we would review Singapore's request for transatlantic fifth freedom rights either when we had liberalised the air services arrangements between the UK and the United States or in January 2000, whichever was the sooner. Bilateral negotiations concerning air services are scheduled to take place with Singapore next month when their request for transatlantic fifth freedom rights will be discussed.

Hedges

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government will introduce legislation to restrict the height to which *(a)* leylandii trees and *(b)* hedges will be allowed to grow next to the boundaries of properties. [102705]

Mr. Mullin: We are currently consulting on possible solutions to the problems caused by leylandii and other high hedges. These include both voluntary and statutory action. We hope as many people as possible will let us have their views, to help us decide whether more should be done to relieve this source of long-running and distressing neighbourhood disputes.

Sewage Sludge

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what guidelines and regulations are in place to regulate the disposal of sewage sludge; [102571]

(2) what advice he has given to water companies on the disposal of sewage sludge since the banning of such waste disposal at sea. [102572]

Mr. Mullin: Government guidance in "Raising the Quality", which was published in September 1998 as part of the Periodic Review of water industry price limits in England and Wales between 2000–05, stated that recovering value from sewage sludge through spreading on agricultural land is the best practicable environmental option for sludge in most circumstances.

It is for individual water companies to decide their strategy for sewage sludge recycling, recovery and disposal, taking account of the costs and environmental requirements and benefits, in discussion with the Department, the Environment Agency and the Director General of Water Services. The Director General's final determinations of water company prices for the period 2000–05, issued on 25 November 1999, take account of the environmental requirements agreed with the Government. The final determinations expect improvements in the disposal of sewage sludge, including the disposal of additional sludge due to the ban on disposal at sea in December 1998. This will cost a total of £800 million between 2000–05.

The following regulations and guidelines are in place in England and Wales to regulate the disposal of sewage sludge:

(i) the spreading of sewage sludge on agricultural land is regulated by the Environment Agency under the Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations 1989, which are complemented by the "Code of Practice for Agricultural Use of Sewage Sludge 1996." The Government support "The Safe Sludge Matrix" agreed in December 1998 by the water industry and major food

retailers which introduces a range of precautionary changes in the requirements for the use of sewage sludge on agricultural land. Subject to consultation and Parliamentary approval, the Government intend to revise the Regulations and the associated Code of Practice during 2000 to place the provisions of the "Safe Sludge Matrix" on a statutory footing.

(ii) the disposal of sewage sludge to landfill and the recovery of sewage sludge for the ecological improvement of non-agricultural land is controlled under Part II of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994.

(iii) the disposal of sewage sludge by incineration is regulated by the Environment Agency through the Integrated Pollution Control system under Part I of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Further guidance is contained in the "Chief Inspector's Integrated Pollution Control Guidance Notes 1996." The proposed EC Waste Incineration Directive, currently under negotiation, will apply to sewage sludge incinerators and is likely to be implemented through powers under the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999, which will shortly supersede Part I of the 1990 Act.

Wild Birds

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to strengthen legislation protecting wild bird species *(a)* in general and *(b)* with particular reference to the species hard hit by the illegal trade to Malta; [102250]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effect of the illegal wild caught bird trade on British bird species; what steps are currently being taken to protect British species; and if he will make a statement. [102251]

Mr. Mullin: The UK's obligations to conserve wild birds under the EC Wild Birds Directive are fulfilled by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Section 1 of the Act makes it an offence to take birds from the wild and to possess a native species of bird unless it can be shown to be legally acquired. Furthermore, section 6 of the Act strengthens these controls making it an offence to sell, offer for sale, possess or transport for sale, any wild bird.

All illegal trade in wildlife is a matter of concern. The Countryside Amenity and Conservation Bill will give extra powers for the prosecution of all wildlife criminals and wildlife law enforcement will be boosted by tougher measures such as custodial sentences. In addition, we are actively discussing with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee what further measures might be appropriate to protect threatened species, including points arising from the review of the schedules affording protection to species under the Act.

The most recent information on levels of bird-related crime is the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' report "Birdcrime 1998". This report shows that incidents reported to the RSPB of illegal trapping, sale and possession of both bird of prey species and other bird species have declined in the last five years. Of the incidents concerning non-bird of prey species, the majority concerned finches.

In view of reports of illegal trade in wild birds, namely finches, to Malta the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which is responsible for providing export health certificates, has introduced new inspection procedures to help prevent future smuggling of "caught" wild birds.

Aquatic Animals

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy for the forthcoming wildlife and countryside Bill to cover aquatic animals; and if he will make a statement. [102253]

Mr. Mullin: The Countryside Amenity and Conservation Bill will include provisions to protect Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and on Wildlife Enforcement, both of which will significantly improve species protection, although not aimed specifically at aquatic species. Wildlife crime, including crime relating to aquatic species, will be punishable by tougher measures such as custodial sentences.

In addition to these provisions we are actively discussing with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee what further measures might be appropriate to protect threatened species including aquatic species. Work is under way on proposals, including points arising from the review of the schedules affording protection to species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, with a view to issuing a consultation document next year.

Small Cetaceans

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to assess the impact of small, fast, personal watercraft on the behaviour and welfare of small cetaceans; and if he will make a statement. [102254]

Mr. Mullin: The issue of the use of personal watercraft was covered in the report of the Inter-Departmental Working Party on the Review of Byelaw Powers for the Coast, published by DETR in October 1998. This discussion paper highlighted a number of gaps in the coverage of existing byelaw powers, most notably with regard to protecting the environment. The working party recommended that local authorities should be given a general power to regulate coastal recreation activities which are outside the responsibility of other relevant authorities, for the purpose of protecting the wider environment. In addition, harbour authorities are able to seek harbour revision orders for environmental purposes. We have given a long-term commitment to introduce legislation to take forward those recommendations in the review which require changes to the law.

Since 1990 the UK has funded the UK Cetaceans Strandings Investigation Project, under which post mortems are carried out on stranded cetaceans to determine cause of death. There is no indication that collision with personal watercraft is a significant cause of death of cetaceans. However the Government are aware that recreational activities, including the use of personal watercraft, has the potential for disturbing cetaceans. As a result of this the Government published in March 1999 the guidelines "Minimising disturbance to cetaceans from recreation at sea". As highlighted in the species action plans for the harbour porpoise and for small dolphins, these guidelines are scheduled for review next year, and account will be taken of the increased use of personal watercraft.

Standard Spending Assessments

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the changes made each year in determining Standard Spending Assessments for shire district councils since their inception, including changes made in the weighting given to different factors; [102426]

(2) if he will list the changes made each year in determining Standard Spending Assessments for shire counties since their inception, including changes made in the weighting given to different factors. [102427]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Changes in the method of determining Standard Spending Assessments are summarised in the relevant editions of the "Standard Spending Assessments Handbook", "Standard Spending Assessments Authority by Authority", and "Standard Spending Assessments Guide to Methodology", copies of which are in the Library. For the most recent years, the information is contained in circular letters to local authorities, dated 2 December 1997, 2 December 1998 and 25 November 1999, copies of which are in the Library. For convenience, copies of the relevant extracts have been placed in the Library. The Standard Spending Assessments formulae, including the weightings given to the factors, are set out in the relevant "Revenue Support Grant Distribution (Amendment) Report (England)" or "The Local Government Finance Report (England)".

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the Standard Spending Assessment per head of population in *(a)* the local authority area containing the constituency of North-East Derbyshire and *(b)* the City of Westminster; and what are the estimated figures for 2000–01. [102431]

Ms Beverley Hughes: *(a)* The Standard Spending Assessment per head of population figures for authorities which fall partly or wholly within the constituency of North-East Derbyshire are as follows:

£

	1999–2000	*Provisional 2000–01*
Chesterfield	95	99
North East Derbyshire	76	79
Derbyshire CC	640	673
Derbyshire Police	53	54

It is not possible to calculate an area figure for any parliamentary constituency unless its boundary corresponds exactly with a local authority district boundary.

(b) The standard spending assessment per head of population figures for Westminster are as follows:

£

	Westminster
1999–2000	1,153
Provisional 2000–01	1,162

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the percentage changes in *(a)* standard spending assessments and *(b)* revenue support grant for (i) shire counties and (ii) shire districts between the settlement for 1999–2000 and his proposed settlement for 2000–01, ranked and numbered in descending order; [102428]

(2) if he will list for 2000–01 the value per head of population of the proposed *(a)* revenue support grant and *(b)* standard spending assessments for (i) shire district councils and (ii) shire counties, ranked and numbered in descending order. [102429]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Tables showing these figures have been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the revenue support grant per head of population in *(a)* the local authority area containing the constituency of North East Derbyshire and *(b)* the City of Westminster; and what are the estimated figures for 2000–01. [102430]

Ms Beverley Hughes: *(a)* The revenue support grant per head of population figures for authorities which fall partly or wholly within the constituency of North East Derbyshire are as follows:

£

	1999–2000	*2000–01* [1]
Chesterfield	35	34
North East Derbyshire	15	13
Derbyshire CC	247	241
Derbyshire Police	16	14

[1] Provisional

It is not possible to calculate an area figure for any parliamentary constituency unless its boundary corresponds exactly with a local authority district boundary.

(b) The revenue support grant per head of population figures for Westminster are as follows:

£

	1999–2000	*2000–01* [1]
Westminster	601	575

[1] Provisional

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes will be made to the standard spending assessments of each shire district council in 2000–01 as a result of their enhanced population figures; and if he will rank and number the changes in descending order. [102387]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested will be calculated and placed in the Library of the House shortly.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the standard spending assessment for 2000–01 for each shire county local education authority divided by the number of pupils and ranked and numbered in descending order. [102721]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The following table shows the ranked education standard spending assessment per pupil figures for shire counties,

Provisional 2000–01 Education Standard Spending Assessment per pupil—shire counties (in descending order)

Local authority	*Education SSA (£/pupil)*	*Ranking*
Hertfordshire	2,864	1
East Sussex	2,848	2
Essex	2,831	3
Kent	2,831	4
Surrey	2,810	5
Oxfordshire	2,794	6
Buckinghamshire	2,787	7
Durham	2,778	8
Bedfordshire	2,768	9
Cornwall	2,758	10
Norfolk	2,746	11
West Sussex	2,740	12
Lancashire	2,730	13
Lincolnshire	2,724	14
Cumbria	2,715	15
Devon	2,714	16
Northumberland	2,713	17
North Yorkshire	2,683	18
Nottinghamshire	2,680	19
Suffolk	2,676	20
Shropshire	2,665	21
Hampshire	2,664	22
Northamptonshire	2,657	23
Somerset	2,646	24
Cambridgeshire	2,644	25
Dorset	2,642	26
Wiltshire	2,634	27
Gloucestershire	2,631	28
Derbyshire	2,613	29
Warwickshire	2,610	30
Cheshire	2,602	31
Worcestershire	2,599	32
Staffordshire	2,580	33
Leicestershire	2,556	34

Pupils are the sum of Pupils aged 4, 5–10, 11–15, and 16+ as defined in the Draft Local Government Finance Report.

Privatised Ports Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what responsibilities private police forces in *(a)* ports and *(b)* airports have under airports and aviation security laws. [102435]

Mr. Mullin: In the main, airport authorities employ either their own staff or, more usually, contract security companies to carry out security duties at airports required by the Department under the Aviation Security Act 1982, as amended by the Aviation and Maritime Security Act 1990 (AMSA). However, Belfast International Airport employs its own police force, numbering about 50. Police officers' duties include perimeter security, patrolling the airport restricted zone and controlling access at one staff checkpoint to the restricted zone. In addition, they will respond to any incidents.

The ports of Belfast, Larne, Liverpool, Bristol, Dover and Tilbury, covered by the AMSA legislation, have private police forces. Each port makes its own arrangements for the use of Ports police, and these vary between the ports.

In addition, Felixstowe, which is not covered by the AMSA legislation, employs private ports police to carry out its own security functions.

London Underground

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the letter of engagement was signed and when the completed work was delivered for the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, "London Underground: Bond Financing *vs* The PPP". [102644]

Mr. Hill: PricewaterhouseCoopers was formally appointed by London Transport to provide financial advice to LT and Government with respect to the London Underground Public Private Partnership on 18 August 1998. Its report, "London Underground: Bond Financing *vs* The PPP", was completed in December 1999.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what fee is payable to PricewaterhouseCoopers for its report, "London Underground: Bond Financing *vs* The PPP", which was deposited in the Library on 8 December; [102673]

(2) how many chargeable hours were incurred by PricewaterhouseCoopers in the preparation of its report, "London Underground: Bond Financing *vs* The PPP", which was deposited in the Library on 8 December. [102672]

Mr. Hill: PricewaterhouseCoopers generated this report as a small part of its standard advisory work on the Public Private Partnership. It is not possible to identify separately the costs involved, but they can accordingly be expected to be small.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide the detailed assumptions and calculations used by PricewaterhouseCoopers in the preparation of its report, "London Underground: Bond Financing *vs* The PPP", which was deposited in the Library on 8 December. [102671]

Mr. Hill: The PricewaterhouseCoopers report already includes notes explaining the basis for its assumptions and calculations.

Bus Employees' Pension

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how much has been spent on legal fees relating to the Bus Employees Superannuation Trust and National Bus Pension Fund by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Government as a whole; [102645]

(2) when the members of the Bus Employees Superannuation Trust and National Bus Pension Fund are likely to receive the £356 million which he announced on 15 June would be returned to them; what the reasons are for the delay in making the payments; and if he will make a statement; [102646]

(3) when the £356 million which the Government are returning to the members of the Bus Employees Superannuation Trust and National Bus Pension Fund was handed over to the trustees for eventual distribution. [102647]

Mr. Hill: The previous Government decided to fund litigation by the National Bus Company pension trustees following a decision by the Pensions Ombudsman. This litigation was concluded with the approval by the High Court on 30 July of the terms of a negotiated settlement. Expenditure by my Department on legal and other costs related to the litigation has been £1,965,000. Of this,

costs incurred by the trustees were £1,723,000 and the Department's costs were £242,000. These figures cover the costs of the litigation. I do not have information on any costs incurred by other Government Departments in connection with the NBC issue.

The Government paid the settlement sum—£355.7 million—over to the trustees on the day of the High Court's decision.

Responsibility for deciding on, and implementing, the distribution of the settlement amongst those eligible to receive a share of it must remain entirely with the NBC pension trustees. This is a substantial and complex task. However I am sure the trustees will be seeking to complete it as quickly as possible.

Organophosphates (Aircrew)

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to identify potential health hazards to civilian aircraft flight officers, cabin crews and passengers from exposure to organophosphate lubricants, in relation to the incident involving a BAe 146 aircraft in Sweden on 12 November; what steps have been taken by the Health and Safety Executive to improve precautions against such exposure since August; and if he will make a statement. [102802]

Mr. Mullin: The incident referred to involved an American manufactured engine on a Swedish registered aircraft. The UK authorities are not therefore involved in the investigation of the incident. A fault was identified with the engine which has now been returned to the United States for examination by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in conjunction with the manufacturer and British Aerospace. It is far too early to say whether this incident involved an oil leak or any exposure to organophosphate contamination.

I have nothing further to add to the statement on Organophosphates in aircraft engine lubricants made by my hon. Friend the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) on 6 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 434W.

Rates Revaluation

Mr. Snape: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the decapitalisation rates to be used in non-domestic rates for the 2000 revaluation. [102849]

Ms Armstrong: In August we published in a consultation paper our proposals on the decapitalisation rates to be used in non-domestic rates for the 2000 revaluation. The proposal to prescribe the rates was widely supported and, after considering the points made to us, we have decided to retain the current rates of 5.5 per cent. for most properties and 3.67 per cent. for educational, health care and Ministry of Defence properties.

However, many respondents felt that the proposal to prescribe rates for only certain types of properties could lead to increased uncertainty. As a result, the benefits of the prescribed rates could be lost. Therefore, after reconsidering this, we have decided that the prescribed rates should apply to all properties assessed on the contractors basis of valuation. This continues the arrangements currently in force for the 1995 rating list.

Regulations implementing this decision will be made shortly.

Local Government Act 1999

Mr. Barron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish guidance to best value authorities on how they might meet the requirements of Part I of the Local Government Act 1999; and if he will make a statement. [102850]

Ms Armstrong: I am publishing today statutory guidance under the provisions of sections 5 and 6 of the Local Government Act 1999 and other guidance on how authorities should carry out their responsibilities under part I of the Act.

Best Value has a key role to play in modernising local government. It will drive up standards, encourage innovation and promote competition. It will make a vital difference to the quality and effectiveness of local services and put local people first. The guidance will help local authorities implement Best Value, beginning with the publication of their Best Value Performance Plans on 31 March 2000. It follows widespread consultation with local government, the Trades Union Congress, the Confederation of British Industry and other key partners.

Copies of this guidance, DETR Circular 10–99, are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses, together with a list of the respondents.

Housing Standards

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to replace the housing fitness standard with a health and safety based rating system. [102881]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government remain committed to developing a rating system as a replacement for the current housing fitness standard. The basic principles of the system are now well established and have received widespread support. Additional piloting with local authorities is being carried out and the consultants' report is now expected in February or March. If we are satisfied that the system will be both robust and practical we will aim to roll it out from next Spring. This would allow time for a training programme for environmental health officers to be set up and enable local authorities to adopt the principles of the new system in parallel with the existing fitness regime. Enforcement action based on the new system would require primary legislation. I hope to bring forward legislation at the earliest opportunity.

Development Plans

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish new guidance on the preparation of development plans. [102904]

Mr. Raynsford: Following the public consultation on a draft earlier this year, I have today published a revision of Planning Policy Guidance note 12—Development

Plans (PPG12). This sets out new procedures to improve the delivery of development plans in England. PPG12 provides a strategic overview of the role and importance of development plans within the planning system. It stresses the need for plans to be prepared and up-dated more quickly and efficiently; emphasises that plans should be clear and succinct; and highlights the importance of integrating sustainable development and transport with land-use policies in development plans.

As a further measure to improve the delivery of development plans, Town and Country Planning (Development Plan) (England) Regulations 1999 have been laid before Parliament today, and are due to come into force on 4 January. These regulations will provide a statutory framework for the new development plan procedures. In addition, my Department has published two new codes of practice for the public explaining the procedures for both structure plans, and for local plans and Unitary Development Plans.

This package of measures to improve the delivery of development plans confirms the Government's commitment to the plan led system and is an important step towards our objective of modernising planning. I have arranged for copies of PPG12 and the codes of practice to be placed in the House Libraries.

Housing Corporation

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the forthcoming Finance Management and Policy Review of the Housing Corporation. [102973]

Mr. Raynsford: As part of the Government's programme of regular five-yearly finance, management and policy reviews of non-departmental public bodies my Department will conduct a thorough review of the Housing Corporation beginning today. The first stage of the review will take the form of a "prior options" study. This will assess the extent to which the Housing Corporation's functions are necessary for the achievement of the Government's policies, and whether there is scope for contracting out or transferring all or part of its functions to another body.

The progress made by the Housing Corporation since the previous review in 1995 will be examined and the results of that examination and of the prior options study will inform a detailed review of the Housing Corporation's policy and financial management systems. The review will look particularly at the effectiveness of the Corporation's regulatory framework for registered social landlords, its arrangements for making informed decisions on investment in social housing and ways of stimulating improved performance in the registered social landlord sector.

To minimise the uncertainty the prior options study will cause, I expect that study will be completed in April 2000 and the conclusions published shortly afterwards. The time required for the more detailed review cannot be foreseen, but I would expect it to be complete by autumn 2000 followed by publication of the conclusions.

An advisory group including members from bodies with an interest in the Housing Corporation's work has been set up and the Department will be seeking the views of a wide range of bodies which deal with the Housing Corporation.

Drink Driving

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the number of reported incidents there were of drink driving in the last 12 months, broken down by region; [101916]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the increased incidence of drink driving over recent Christmas and new year holiday periods. [101917]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

Statistics of screening breath tests and the number positive or refused are published annually in "British Test Statistics, England and Wales", a Home Office Statistical Bulletin. The 1998 edition, Issue 16/99, was published on 9 September 1999, and contains figures for each police force area. Figures for each month of the year are also shown, December being the nearest to the Christmas and the new year period in the statistics held centrally. (The Association of Chief Police Officers has continued to monitor this period, but in recent years only in terms of tests given after collisions).

Figures for 1999 are not yet available.

A copy of the bulletin referred to is in the Library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Council Tax Benefit

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when the consultants' review on the impact of the introduction of the changes to Council Tax Benefit Regulations will be published; and if he will make a statement; [101040]

(2) if he will list the local authorities which have taken part in the consultants' review of the impact of the changes to Council Tax Benefit Regulations. [101039]

Angela Eagle: In March 1999 we commissioned independent researchers to monitor the effects of the Council Tax Benefit (CTB) restriction introduced in April 1998. Because of the complexities of the research involving a small, tightly specified group of CTB claims and their corresponding council tax accounts and the interrogation of two IT systems, we began with a feasibility study. In July 1999 we decided that there was just enough evidence to suggest that local authorities (LAs) would be able to provide us with the required information to assess whether the research was practical.

We originally approached 55 local authorities with a view of obtaining data from 40. However, so far we have only received data from 22 authorities, and in some cases these are partial data. On the whole, participating LAs have sought to co-operate but have encountered difficulties and delays in extracting usable data. Currently we do not have enough data of sufficient quality to carry out reliable analyses. Therefore, we are planning to write

again to the 33 local authorities who have not yet provided data to ask them to help us. At this stage, therefore, we cannot be precise about the research and publication details.

Participation in social research conducted on behalf of the Department is entirely voluntary; this applies to individuals and organisations. In order to encourage involvement and ensure as representative a picture as possible, we protect the confidentiality of respondents. As we provide a contractual assurance that participants, including local authorities in this case, will not be identified, we cannot list the names of authorities which have taken part in the review of the impact of changes to the Council Tax Benefit Regulations. However, individual local authorities may choose to indicate they have participated.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his proposals to reform Housing Benefit. [102094]

Angela Eagle: We are committed to driving forward improvements in the benefit services authorities provide, so that they are faster, more accurate and more secure, while also achieving value for money and taking account of the views and needs of local people.

We are already working towards this aim. For example we have introduced a regime which requires more rigorous verification and checking, (including a legal requirement which involves establishing a person's identity). In addition, over 200 local authorities have already joined the Royal Mail "Do Not Redirect" scheme, to prevent fraudulent claimants submitting benefit claims from false addresses.

From next April the Best Value regime will be introduced. This will drive up standards of service delivery in local authorities through a series of challenging targets against key areas of performance.

We will present further proposals for reform of the Housing Benefit scheme in a Green Paper in due course. This will further tackle the weaknesses of the system we inherited.

Pensions

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to allow personal pension fund holders to purchase fixed-term annuities as an alternative to life annuities. [102188]

Mr. Rooker: There are no plans to allow personal pension fund holders to purchase fixed term annuities as an alternative to life annuities. An essential feature of a pension is that it provides a guaranteed income for the rest of the pensioner's life. A fixed term annuity would not achieve this and would run the risk of leaving pensioners without any source of income in their later years.

Family Credit

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the entitlement period for family credit payments; and if payments are made (i) in arrears or (ii) in advance of an entitlement period. [102493]

Angela Eagle: Family Credit benefit weeks run from Tuesday to Monday. If the date of the claim is a Tuesday, entitlement begins then. Otherwise, entitlement begins on the first Tuesday following the date of claim. The entitlement period is for 26 weeks. There are two main methods of payment, Automated Credit Transfer (ACT) and order book.

ACT payment is made in arrears on the last working day in each four-week period for the duration of the 26 week period. Payment by order book payment is made weekly in arrears each Tuesday.

Working Families Tax Credit, which is administered by the Inland Revenue, replaced Family Credit from 5 October 1999. It has the same entitlement period.

Benefit Agency Standards Committee

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the appointment of members of the Benefits Agency Standards Committee has been completed. [102907]

Angela Eagle: I am pleased to announce that membership of the Committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Peter Lehmann has been agreed.

The Committee's independence has been assured by the appointment of seven independent non-executive members alongside two operational executives from the Benefits Agency. The membership reflects a diversity of background and experience. The full list of members together with short pen pictures of each has been placed in the Library.

The Committee will report directly to the Benefits Agency Chief Executive providing him with independent assurance on standards of decision making in the Agency, as well as making recommendations for continuous improvement in the quality of that decision making.

Asbestos-related Disease

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 58W, on asbestos-related disease, if he will publish the advice he received from the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council on awards for bilateral diffuse pleural thickening. [101621]

Mr. Bayley: The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council Report "Asbestos Related Diseases" (Cm 3467), was published in November 1996. A copy is in the Library.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Airport Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what responsibilities he retains in relation to the oversight of *(a)* security of airports in Northern Ireland and *(b)* management of the Northern Ireland Airport Police; and what responsibilities are devolved. [102440]

Mr. Ingram: As policing and security are reserved matters for administration by this Government, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

has retained all of his current responsibilities for the oversight of security at Northern Ireland airports and management of the Northern Ireland Airport Police. None of these responsibilities are being devolved at this time to the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what undertakings were given by the purchasers at the time of the privatisation of the Northern Ireland International Airport in relation to the future management and independence of the Northern Ireland Airport Police; and what scrutiny has been conducted since as to the performance of these undertakings. [102441]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

British Diplomatic Posts (Costs)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what were the annual running costs in the last year for which figures are available of *(a)* the United Kingdom's embassies in the EU, *(b)* the British Embassy in Washington DC, *(c)* the British Consulate General in San Francisco and *(d)* the British embassies and consulates in the USA in total. [102444]

Mr. Hain: The running costs (in pounds sterling) for 1998–99 are as follows:

Countries	£
(a) Embassies in the EU	
Austria	1,624,989
Belgium	1,613,336
Denmark	1,979,145
Eire	2,021,151
Finland	1,622,182
France	8,311,896
Germany	5,334,710
Greece	3,020,542
Italy	5,689,673
Luxembourg	904,600
Netherlands	2,377,494
Portugal	2,223,375
Spain	5,850,231
Sweden	1,917,642
Total	44,490,966
(b) British Embassy	
Washington DC	14,288,628
(c) Consulate General	
San Francisco	634,434
(d) USA in Total	
USA Total	20,720,979

The costs of the Embassies include spend, incurred at post, on behalf of their subordinate posts.The figures given are purely the cash element charged to the posts in question.

No support costs have been included.

Correspondence

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the Under-Secretary of State for Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) will reply to the hon. Member for New Forest, West's letter of 7 October regarding Mr. Dahunsi. [102423]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The hon. Member for New Forest, West's letter of 7 October, addressed to Mr. O'Brien at the Home Office, was forwarded to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for reply and was received in the Visa Correspondence Unit on 25 October. The Unit replied to the hon. Member on 8 December.

Hong Kong

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what will be the status of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on the question of Hong Kong after the Joint Liaison Group ceases to meet on 1 January; and if he will make a statement. [102905]

Mr. Battle: The Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong is a treaty registered at the United Nations which creates international rights and obligations for both parties to it. The Joint Declaration has no termination date, although China has made an explicit commitment that its basic policies on Hong Kong, which include maintaining Hong Kong's capitalist system and way of life, will remain unchanged for 50 years from 1 July 1997. Under paragraph 7 of the Joint Declaration, China committed herself to abide by all her commitments in the Joint Declaration.

Her Majesty's Government will continue to take a close interest in developments in Hong Kong and to report to Parliament on the implementation of the Joint Declaration.

Kosovo

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the proposed export of electrical firing cable to the HALO Trust in Kosovo. [102906]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have granted a licence for the export to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) of 7 x 500m lengths of electrical firing cable for use by the HALO Trust, an organisation engaged in humanitarian demining activities in Kosovo on behalf of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). These goods are on the UK's Military List.

UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1160 imposed an arms embargo on the FRY. The only exception to this embargo is that in UNSCR 1244, which provides that prohibitions imposed by UNSCR 1160 shall not apply to the sale or supply of arms and related material for use by the international civil and security presence in Kosovo. We have notified the UN Sanctions Committee of this export and they have raised no objection. The export of the equipment required for demining purposes is not prohibited by the EU arms embargo.

Chechnya

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is his policy to encourage the Government of Russia to negotiate with the Government of Chechnya; and if he will list the names of those who are able to represent Chechnya. [102258]

Mr. Vaz: In all our contacts with the Russian Government we have pressed them to pursue a negotiated solution with the elected Chechen authorities, including Chechen President Maskhadov, and to use the good offices of the OSCE.

Gibraltar

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to Spain about the incident on 29 November when a Gibraltarian was prevented entry into Spain on the basis that as a British passport holder he could not drive a Gibraltar-registered car; what undertakings have been received from Spain that similar actions will not occur again; and if he will make a statement. [102434]

Mr. Vaz: We are aware of the incident at the border on 29 November and understand that a report was made to the Royal Gibraltar Police. We understand that the individual concerned was able to cross the border into Spain.

We regularly make clear to the Spanish authorities their obligations to operate the border in a way consistent with their EC obligations on free movement of persons.

Orphans' Visas

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the changes in charges since 1997 for visas for orphans visiting the UK for holidays from the former Republic of Yugoslavia; and if he will make a statement. [102464]

Mr. Vaz: The fee for a single entry visitor's visa has remained unchanged since 1995 when it was set at its current level of £33.

There are no special charging arrangements for visitors from the former Republic of Yugoslavia.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the current work programme of the Performance and Innovation Unit including *(a)* the titles of all reports in preparation and their expected publication dates and *(b)* any further subjects due to be examined by the unit during the period 2000 to 2002. [101180]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) is currently undertaking the following studies:

Accountability and incentives for joined-up Government.

The role of central Government at the regional and local level.

Objectives for rural economies.

Active ageing.

The use of analysis and modelling in central Government.

Longer term strategic challenges facing the Government.

The pursuit and seizure of criminal assets.

The Post Office network.

Social, health, environmental and trade objectives on the global stage.

Strategic options for the electronic delivery of Government services.

The PIU aims to publish reports from the first five projects over the next two months. Decisions arising from the further projects will be made public in due course.

Further PIU projects have not been decided.

Institute of Public Policy Research

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the research work carried out or being carried out since 1 May 1997 on behalf of the Government by the Institute of Public Policy Research. [101730]

The Prime Minister: The information requested is not held centrally. However, it is a requirement that all such contracts are let in accordance with the Treasury procurement guidelines.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements he has put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings with people outside his Office. [102368]

The Prime Minister: Decisions on the format of records of meetings normally depend on the nature of the discussion.

Policy Unit

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the role and responsibilities of Geoffrey Norris in his Office's Policy Unit. [102480]

The Prime Minister: Mr. Norris has responsibility for Trade and Industry, and Regional and Planning Policy.

State Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister for what reasons governors general of Commonwealth states of which Her Majesty the Queen is Head of State are not invited to make State Visits to the United Kingdom. [101406]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Inward State Visits are made only by foreign and commonwealth Heads of State. It would not be appropriate for the Queen's representative in one of Her Majesty's other Realms to pay a State Visit to the United Kingdom.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Direct Access Government Internet Service

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he intends to upgrade the Direct Access Government Internet Service which provides business with a one-stop shop for regulatory guidance and forms. [102967]

Ms Hewitt: I am pleased to announce that an improved version of the service is being launched today. As well as providing business with easier access to regulatory information they will be able to register which areas of regulation they are interested in and receive e-mailed links to the latest document releases on a daily basis. The new service can be accessed at http://www.dag-business.gov.uk and will be incorporated as part of the Small Business Service from next April.

Exports

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made by his Department towards a binding commitment on tariff-free and quota-free access for exports from the poorest 48 countries in the world. [102301]

Mr. Caborn: Under the UK Presidency of the European Union in 1998, the EU agreed to provide duty free access for essentially all products from the Least Developed Countries by 2005. We will be pressing the EU to fulfil this commitment as soon as possible. More generally, we will continue to call for zero tariffs to be applied to all goods from the Least Developed Countries, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister promised in his speech at Mansion House on 22 November.

In addition, and notwithstanding the fact that the WTO Seattle Ministerial conference was suspended without agreement between member Governments on a new multilateral market access initiative for the Least Developed Countries, we will continue to urge other developed countries to match the EU's commitment.

Rover

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the European Commission's response to the proposal for state aid to Rover; and if a revised proposal is being considered. [102204]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The UK officially notified its intention to provide aid for Longbridge at the end of August 1999. A number of questions were raised by the European Commission and these questions have been fully answered. We now anticipate that the Commission may open an Article 88(2) procedure on this case. An announcement is expected shortly. Such a procedure is normal practice and allows the European Commission to consider the views of third parties. We remain hopeful of a positive outcome to the investigation.

We are not considering a revised proposal.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his latest estimate of the cost of the proposed state aid to Rover. [102205]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The offer of aid to Rover/BMW remains the same as that announced by the Secretary of State on 23 June 1999: a support package of £152 million, made up of £129 million Regional Selective Assistance (RSA), with the balance being made up by the local partners. The offer remains subject to clearance by the European Union.

Ghana

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what export credit guarantees were made in respect of exports to Ghana in each of the last five years; how many of the guarantees have now lapsed; and how many payments have been made by the ECGD in respect of these guarantees. [101971]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The number and value of ECGD guarantees made in respect of exports to Ghana in each of the last five years are detailed in the following table along with the payments made by ECGD in respect of these guarantees:

Year	*Number of guarantees issued*	*Value of guarantees £ million*	*Payments made in each year £ million*
1994–95	9	132.48	0
1995–96	4	71.43	0
1996–97	9	108.92	0
1997–98	2	20.17	2.32
1998–99	3	17.65	0.059
1999–2000[1]	1	1.01	3.85

[1] To 30 November

Of the total value of claims paid of £6.23 million, £3.84 remains outstanding. Five of these guarantees have now lapsed.

Horizon Project

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the documentation on the *(a)* business objectives, *(b)* rollout timetable, *(c)* costs and *(d)* partners of the Horizon project; and if the costs of implementation will be met by Her Majesty's Treasury or the Post Office. [101379]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The information requested is as follows.

(a) The objective of the revised Horizon project announced on 24 May this year, which will equip all post offices with a modern on-line electronic IT platform, is to enable Post Office Counters Ltd. to modernise existing services and attract new business to secure a viable future for the network as a whole.

(b) The Post Office plans to complete the rollout of the Horizon platform to all post offices throughout the UK by the spring of 2001. 1,856 offices have so far been automated.

(c) The revised Horizon project is expected to cost around £1 billion over the five year period to 2005.

(d) The contract is between Post Office Counters Ltd. and ICL Pathway.

(e) The Government have agreed to contribute £480 million towards the capital costs of the project. The remainder will be funded by the Post Office.

Internal Market Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Internal Market Council held in Brussels on 7 December; and if he will make a statement. [102348]

Mrs. Liddell: I represented the UK at the Internal Market Council in Brussels on 7 December.

There were discussions on the new Single Market Strategy, the Joint Presidency Work Programme and the Commission's Single Market Scoreboard. There was

general support from the Council, although some member states, including the UK, were unable to endorse all the Target Actions in the Single Market Strategy. The Council agreed Conclusions on Distance Marketing of Financial Services and on the Community Customs Code.

The Council reached political agreement on Electronic Commerce (with Belgium abstaining). The Directive sets out a legal framework for electronic commerce in the internal market, based on the principle that the legislation of the service provider's home state applies. The Council reached unanimous political agreement on amendments to a number of directives concerning mutual recognition of qualifications, and political agreement on three food Directives harmonising labelling and compositional requirements for sugar, preserved milk and fruit juice (sugar agreed by unanimity, milk by qualified majority with Belgium against, and fruit juices by qualified majority with Belgium against and Netherlands abstaining).

The UK reported in the context of a discussion on the Takeovers Directive that talks with Spain on a general settlement of the issue of communications between Gibraltar competent authorities and counterparts in other member states were making progress.

The Commission reported progress on public procurement, Simpler Legislation in the Internal Market (SLIM) and exhaustion of trademark rights. The Council took note of reports on the Copyright Directive, the EU Data Protection Directive, the review of chemical policy and the follow-up to the Council Resolution on standardisation.

There was no decision on the proposed Directive on Artists' Resale Rights; although a large majority supported the Presidency proposal there was a willingness to consider alternative solutions. The Presidency, the Commission and most member states are now pressing for agreement before the end of the year.

Food Standards

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will publish the guidance he has given to the Food Standards Agency regarding the impact on its work of the World Trade Organisation Seattle round; [101650]

(2) what representations he has received from the Food Standards Agency concerning the implications for its remit of the World Trade Organisation Seattle round. [101651]

Mr. Caborn: The Food Standards Agency will be formally established in spring 2000. It will be fully consulted on any changes which may be proposed to the WTO SPS Agreement (which sets out rules for trade measures to protect food safety, animal and plant health), or other WTO agreements which may have a bearing on its responsibilities.

Parcelforce

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many parking fines were incurred by Parcelforce vehicles in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 1998; and how many Parcelforce vehicles there are currently. [101680]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Parcelforce does not keep records of parking fines centrally, and this information could not be obtained without disproportionate cost.

The Road Traffic Act Regulation 1984 gives local authorities the power to make traffic regulation orders to restrict parking. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions issue guidance to local authorities to give exemptions to the Post Office when carrying out statutory duties using licensed Royal Mail liveried vehicles engaged in the collection and delivery of letters in accordance with the statutory duty of the Post Office for the conveyance of letters. There is no similar guidance for Parcelforce vehicles.

Parking fines are being incurred by Parcelforce drivers while on delivery as a result of vehicles which are parked illegally.

Parcelforce Worldwide currently operates a total fleet of around 7,000 operational vehicles, the main types are:

Quantity	*Vehicle type*
500	Articulated motive units
600	Trailers
3,000	35 tonne vans
1,000	75 tonne trucks
120	Car derived vans

Post Office Network

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of significant numbers of child benefit claimants switching from cash to direct bank account payments on the rural post office network; and if he will make a statement. [101328]

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what estimate he has made of the impact on *(a)* post office incomes and *(b)* the viability of post offices of paying social security benefits directly into claimants' bank accounts; and if he will make a statement; [101373]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of post offices which would close in *(a)* the Vale of Glamorgan, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* the United Kingdom if social security benefits were to be paid directly into claimants' bank accounts. [101375]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There will be no change before 2003 to existing methods of paying social security benefits, under which recipients can choose between payment by order book at a post office and payment direct to a bank account using the automated credit transfer system (ACT). Some 54 per cent. of new child benefit recipients and 47 per cent. of new pensioners currently choose to have their benefits/pensions paid by ACT. The Horizon counters automation project will equip all post offices with a modern, on-line IT platform by 2001, and will enable the Post Office to extend its existing arrangements with the high street banks under which customers of those banks—including benefit recipients—can access their accounts at post offices. This project, to which the Government have made a significant financial contribution, represents a major investment in the future of the post office network to which the Government

remain fully committed. It will ensure that all benefit recipients who wish to do so will be able to access their benefits in cash at post offices. It will also offer other bank customers the benefits of wider availability of banking services, especially in rural areas.

For the longer-term future, the Prime Minister has asked the Performance and Innovation Unit within the Cabinet Office to undertake a study of the contribution which post offices make to their local communities, and how the network can best contribute to Government objectives.

Concessionary Fuel

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the cost per tonne of fuel delivered of the retired miners' concessionary fuel scheme. [102394]

Mrs. Liddell: The cost per tonne of fuel delivered under the retired miners' concessionary fuel scheme varies considerably between different types of fuel and different parts of the country. The weighted average cost per tonne of fuel delivered between April 1999 and November 1999, including VAT at 5 per cent., was £160.00.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the *(a)* total cost of the retired miners' concessionary fuel scheme and *(b)* the total number of retired miners eligible for it, in the last quarter for which figures are available. [102400]

Mrs. Liddell: British Coal's former employees and their dependants are eligible to benefits under the retired miners' concessionary fuel scheme in two forms, solid fuel and cash in lieu of solid fuel. In the three months September to November 1999 the total cost of the scheme was:

(a)	*£ million*
Fuel	14.7
Cash in lieu	5.4
Total	20.1

The number of beneficiaries eligible was:

(b)	*Number*
Fuel	79,752
Cash in lieu	78,701
Total	158,453

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the level of entitlement to retired miners concessionary fuel for each of the client groups entitled to receive it. [102402]

Mrs. Liddell: The level of entitlement is set out in Fuel Agreements which were negotiated between British Coal (BC) and the various mining unions. The entitlements can be taken in either solid fuel or cash in lieu. The amount of solid fuel a former employee of BC, or their dependant, can receive each year varies according to the types of solid fuel, the householder status, age and location of the beneficiary.

Typical entitlements for former industrial and clerical workers who are full householders are in the following ranges:

	Tonnes
Housecoal	5,000–5,100
Anthracites	4,100–5,000
Manufactures smokeless fuels	3,350–4,800

The cash-in-lieu rates for these former grades is either £267 or £360 a year.

ECGD

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for the involvement of private finance in the Export Credits Guarantee Department. [102236]

Mr. Caborn: The Review of the Mission and Status of ECGD, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced in the House on 27 July 1999, *Official Report,* columns 305–06W, is still in progress and it is important not to pre-judge the outcome. Once Ministers have decided what ECGD's future functions and direction should be, we will start to consider how ECGD's services can best be delivered and whether any change in its status would be required. This will include an assessment of whether all, or any part, of ECGD's operations should be privatised or contracted out. ECGD does, of course, already work closely with the private sector by issuing guarantees to banks providing finance to UK exporters.

Clothing Industry

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people were employed in Britain's clothing industry *(a)* in each of the past 20 years, *(b)* in June 1997 and *(c)* at the most recent date for which figures are available. [102425]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The information is available in the table.

Great Britain employee jobs—annual (June of each year)

	SIC(92)18 Wearing apparel
1979	297.0
1980	270.3
1981	234.7
1982	220.4
1983	212.7
1984	216.2
1985	218.3
1986	219.9
1987	217.1
1988	218.6
1989	210.3
1990	193.4
1991	159.1
1992	152.2
1993	154.1
1994	148.4
1995	144.5
1996	139.5
1997	138.3
1998	129.4
1999	107.7

Notes:
1. Rounded to thousands
2. Not seasonally adjusted

Monthly data *Month and year*	*SIC(92)18* *Wearing apparel*
June 1997	138.3
September 1999	104.3

Source:
Office for National Statistics

Diamond Project

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will define those staff positions at the Daresbury Laboratory which will have a key role in the design and construction of the Diamond project. [102718]

Ms Hewitt: It is not possible to define staff positions at the Daresbury Laboratory who will have a key role in the design and construction of the synchrotron facility. The project is a partnership involving the Wellcome Trust and the French Government and the deployment of staff has not been agreed. We recognise the expertise of the CCLRC staff and they will be involved in all stages of the project as appropriate.

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which staff grades at the *(a)* Daresbury Laboratory and *(b)* Rutherford Appleton Laboratory have been directly involved in the design of the Diamond project. [102717]

Ms Hewitt: It is not practical to break down the effort by staff grades at the laboratories. The majority (greater than 99 per cent.) of the staff involved to date in the Diamond project are mobile grades based at the Daresbury Laboratory.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Starrs Case

26. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Advocate-General what estimate she has made of the additional costs expected for the legal system in Scotland as a result of the decision in the Starrs case. [101244]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I have not made an estimate of these costs, as the matter does not fall within my responsibility. Administration of justice in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

Temporary Sheriffs

28. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Advocate-General when she last met the Scottish Executive's Law Officers to discuss the implications of the European Court on human rights judgment relating to temporary sheriffs. [101246]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: The Question of temporary sheriffs has not been the subject of a judgment by the European Court of Human Rights. It has been the subject of a judgment by the High Court of Justiciary in Scotland. The matter is sub judice and it would not be appropriate to comment further.

Devolution

29. **Ms Squire:** To ask the Advocate-General if she will make a statement on her functions and responsibilities relating to devolution issues under the Scotland Act 1998. [101247]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: Under the Scotland Act devolution issues are defined in Schedule 6. They relate to questions about the competence of Acts of the Scottish Parliament or things done by the Scottish Executive. For example they may be about compatibility with the Scotland Act itself, or with European Community Law or rights under the European Convention on Human Rights.

I have powers to bring or defend proceedings raising devolution issues in the Scottish Courts or the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. If other people raise devolution issues in court proceedings in Scotland they must give notice to the Advocate-General.

The Advocate-General also, like the Lord Advocate and the Attorney-General, has the right to refer Bills of the Scottish Parliament, before they are finally enacted, to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council so that they can decide whether a Bill or any provision of it is competent. The main provisions are set out in Section 32, 33 and 34 of the Scotland Act 1998.

30. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Advocate-General on how many occasions devolution issues have been raised with her since her appointment; and what matters were covered. [101248]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I have received over 200 notices of devolution issues. All have concerned alleged incompatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Tuition Fees

31. **Mr. Swinney:** To ask the Advocate-General what role she has had in assessing the legal implications of moves by the Scottish Parliament to abolish tuition fees in relation to the position of non-Scottish domiciled students. [101249]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: There is a long standing convention, followed by successive Governments, that neither the substance of Law Officers' advice, nor the fact that they have been consulted is disclosed outside Government. I see no reason for departure from that Convention on this occasion.

Immigration and Asylum

32. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Advocate-General what recent discussions she has had with the Lord Advocate concerning matters relating to the implementation in Scotland of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. [101250]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I have given to the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart), *Official Report*, column 138.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Westminster Hall

52. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she has made of the experiment of the House sitting in Westminster Hall. [101271]

Mrs. Beckett: The experiment began on 30 November, and it is too early to make a firm assessment. However, debates in Westminster Hall have been as lively and well attended as those in the Chamber, and the new forum already appears to offer Members increased opportunities for debate. The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons has agreed to

"evaluate the experiment as a whole before the end of the session"

as well as keeping a "watching brief" on proceedings.

Modernisation

54. **Mr. Drew:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the modernisation of the procedures of the House which have been introduced since 1997. [101273]

57. **Dr. Tony Wright:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on her plans to implement the recommendations of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons. [101276]

Mrs. Beckett: Forty-seven of the 54 recommendations of the Modernisation Committee directed at Government have already been implemented. The House has adopted a range of measures to improve the scrutiny of legislation; Thursday sittings have been brought forward; the scrutiny of European business has been reformed and sittings in Westminster Hall have begun.

59. **Judy Mallaber:** To ask the President of the Council what further plans she has for modernising the legislative process. [101278]

Mrs. Beckett: As the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons recommended, the Government are using a variety of procedures for legislation. We have had the first carryover of a public Bill and the use of a Special Standing Committee for the Asylum and Immigration Bill, we have published six Bills in draft and set up ad hoc Committees of this House and ad hoc joint Committees to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny.

Iraq

55. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the President of the Council if she will take steps to establish a Select Committee on Iraq. [101274]

Mr. Tipping: We have no plans to do so. The Foreign Affairs Committee is already able to conduct inquiries into this.

Nursery

56. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what plans the Commission has to develop a workplace nursery in the Palace of Westminster. [101275]

Mr. Kirkwood: None.

The principal recommendations of the Administration Committee which commissioned the 1998 Childcare Facilities Survey of the House, have all been implemented. These include the running of a highly popular voucher scheme (£7 per day for a child under five) and advice to Members that they can use the Office Cost Allowance to help their employees with the costs of child care.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Holiday

58. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the President of the Council what arrangements she has made for the functioning of Government over the millennium holiday period. [101277]

Mr. Tipping: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), *Official Report*, columns 148–49.

Privy Council

60. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to establish a system of parliamentary debate on the exercise of executive functions by the Privy Council. [101279]

Mr. Tipping: There are no plans to introduce such a system.

Millennium Compliance

61. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she has made of the impact of the United Kingdom's public information programme on the millennium bug. [101280]

Mr. Tipping: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), *Official Report*, column 147.

Palace of Westminster

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what estimate he has made of the costs of maintaining and repairing the Palace of Westminster in the current financial year. [101266]

Sir Sydney Chapman: Repair and maintenance costs exclusively charged to the Palace of Westminster are forecast to be some £27 million this financial year.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Shrewsbury County Court

38. **Mr. Paul Marsden:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the progress made in refurbishing the Shrewsbury county court. [101256]

Jane Kennedy: Plans to refurbish Shrewsbury county court are now well advanced. The only matter, which remains to be resolved, is the arrangements for payment of the agreed contribution of £40,000 to the Court Service by the local authorities.

McKenzie Friends

39. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received regarding McKenzie friends. [101257]

Mr. Lock: I have received representations from Families Need Fathers, the Equal Parenting Party and from 10 Members of this House.

Magistrates

40. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to increase the total number of magistrates in England and Wales. [101258]

Jane Kennedy: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the oral answer I gave today to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson).

43. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what actions his Department is taking to ensure that the magistracy reflects the socio-economic balance of the community it serves. [101261]

Jane Kennedy: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor requires his local Advisory Committees to do more than simply reflect the socio-economic balance of the community. He wishes to ensure that benches broadly reflect the communities they serve in terms of social background, gender, ethnic origin, geographical spread and occupation. Social background is currently defined in terms of political affiliation, which is unsatisfactory, and an alternative is being sought.

E-commerce

41. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the Lord Chancellor's Department's role in representing the United Kingdom in discussions on e-commerce. [101259]

Mr. Lock: E-commerce falls within the area of ministerial responsibility of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Various Departments, including the Lord Chancellor's Department, have interests in the policy implications of e-commerce and there has been full consultation and co-ordination between them.

Trial Venue Appeals

42. **Mr. Woodward:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much judicial time in the Crown court the Government estimate will be taken up hearing appeals on the venue of trials. [101260]

Jane Kennedy: If defendants wish to test magistrates' decisions to try a case instead of sending it for jury trial, they will be able to lodge a written appeal in the Crown court. The judicial time needed to deal with these appeals in the Crown court is estimated to be 148 days a year.

Magistrates Courts

45. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates courts there were in 1979; what the current figure is; and if he will make a statement. [101263]

Jane Kennedy: There were 435 magistrates courthouses, containing a total of 1,570 courtrooms, at 30 September 1999. There were 516 courthouses containing 1,735 courtrooms in September 1995. There are no earlier figures held centrally. Under the Justices of the Peace Act 1979, the provision of magistrates courthouse accommodation is a matter for the courts committee for the area concerned to determine, in conjunction with the local paying authority.

Judicial Resource Allocation

47. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what account the Lord Chancellor takes of the views of the Council of Circuit Judges on proposed changes in the work of the courts. [101265]

Jane Kennedy: The views of Her Majesty's Council of Circuit Judges are sought on a wide range of policy and operational issues. Its responses receive the same careful consideration as those of other consultees.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent consultations he has had with the Council of Circuit Judges on efficient allocation of judicial resources. [101264]

Jane Kennedy: The Court Service meets regularly with representatives of the Council of Circuit Judges, most recently on 2 December. I understand that resources and allocations were discussed then.

Criminal Courts

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Government have for a review of the criminal courts. [102975]

Jane Kennedy: My noble and learned Friend, the Lord Chancellor, has appointed the right hon. Lord Justice Auld to conduct a review of the criminal courts. The terms of reference of the review are as follows:

> "An inquiry into the practices and procedures of, and the rules of evidence applied by, the criminal courts at every level, with a view to ensuring that they deliver justice fairly, by streamlining all their processes, increasing their efficiency and strengthening the effectiveness of their relationships with others across the whole of the criminal justice system, and having regard to the interests of all parties including the victims and witnesses, thereby promoting public confidence in the law".

The review is expected to last for twelve months. Copies of the terms of reference of the review have today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Justices of the Peace

Mr. Cox: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many Justices of the Peace were appointed in England and Wales in the last 12 months; and how many were *(a)* from an ethnic minority background, *(b)* men and *(c)* women. [102404]

Jane Kennedy: In the 12 months ending 30 November 1999, 1,564 Justices of the Peace were appointed in England and Wales (including the Duchy of Lancaster) of whom 802 were men and 762 were women; 123 were from an ethnic minority background, 59 men and 64 women.

Child Access

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will review the procedures for the enforcement of court orders relating to access by non-resident parents to their children; and if he will make a statement. [102242]

Jane Kennedy: We have no current plans to review the law in this area. The courts have their usual powers in relation to the enforcement of contact orders, including the powers to fine or imprison those who wilfully disobey or obstruct an order. However, in considering whether to use these powers in child contact cases, the courts rightly regard the best interests of the children as being their paramount concern. Consequently the courts are unlikely to fine or imprison a parent with whom a child is resident, for breaching a contact order, if they conclude that to do so would adversely affect the child concerned. Another possibility in cases where contact is denied would be for the non-resident parent to apply to the court for the residence of the child to be changed, but, again, the court would rightly regard the interests of the child as its paramount concern in determining such an application.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102361]

Mr. Lock: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102325]

Jane Kennedy: This information is not collected or held centrally. If customers require specific facilities they can normally be supplied on a local basis.

Office for the Supervision of Solicitors

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what discussions have taken place with the senior management of the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors concerning the need for communication to all hon. Members on the progress regarding the backlog of outstanding cases, following the report of the Legal Services Ombudsman. [102720]

Mr. Lock: I met the President of the Law Society on 20 October when we discussed the position at the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. We also discussed the possibility of a meeting taking place at which all hon. Members could be advised as to the progress being made in respect of the timetable for improvements at the OSS. A meeting has now been arranged by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) and will take place on 26 January 2000. Representatives from the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors will be present at this meeting and will be able to discuss fully with Members the concerns about the progress being made with regard to the backlog of outstanding cases.

Child Abduction

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals the Government have for changes to the laws preventing illegal abduction of children in tug-of-love cases, with reference to the Hague Convention and overseas courts' differing interpretation and with particular reference to decisions of the courts in Greece. [102719]

Jane Kennedy: The Government have no plans to amend the law in this way. The Government believe that the legal principles underlying the operation of the Hague Child Abduction Convention are generally satisfactory. It participates fully in the mechanisms for reviewing the operation of international conventions on child abduction, both internationally and bilaterally.

SCOTLAND

Manufacturing Investment

6. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has held with the First Minister on prospects for inward investment for the manufacturing sector in Scotland. [101224]

Dr. Reid: I have regular discussions with the First Minister on a wide variety of topics. Inward investors have made an important contribution to the Scottish economy in recent years and I hope we will continue to attract them. It is an area in which Scotland benefits from both the UK effort and the distinctive Scottish dimension.

Cabinet Sub-Committees

8. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement regarding proposals for the creation of Cabinet Sub-Committees with Ministers of the Scottish Executive and the UK Government. [101226]

Dr. Reid: I represent Scottish interests in the Cabinet and its Committees. The Scottish Executive are not members of Cabinet Committees which decide the policy of the UK Government, but can work alongside UK Ministers in joint committees or in groups set up to look at particular issues. That is the kind of partnership which this Government can create, in the best interests of the whole UK.

12. **Mr. Swinney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the operation and staffing of the proposed joint ministerial sub-committees between the Scottish Executive and UK Departments. [101230]

Dr. Reid: The Joint Action Committees on Poverty and the Knowledge Economy will operate as functional committees of the Joint Ministerial Committee, details of which were set out in the Memorandum of Understanding published in October. The Secretariat will be drawn from each of the devolved Administrations,

including Northern Ireland, the Cabinet Office, Treasury and DSS and DTI as appropriate. The first meeting of the Joint Action Committee on Poverty took place on Thursday 9 December.

Identity Cards

9. **Mr. Ottaway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on Government proposals to introduce a UK-wide identity card scheme. [101227]

Mr. Wilson: This is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Inward Investment

10. **Mr. Donohoe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has held with the Scottish Executive about the Memorandum of Understanding in relation to inward investment. [101228]

Mr. Wilson: The Memorandum of Understanding and the Concordat dealing with financial assistance for inward investment were discussed in detail with the Scottish Executive ahead of publication on 1 October.

Rural Regional Assistance

11. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures he proposes to take to help those rural regions that will no longer receive aid from European structural funds under the new Objective 2 but which still require some form of assistance. [101229]

Mr. Wilson: The United Kingdom proposals submitted to the Commission focus on the areas of greater need.

Areas no longer eligible under Objective 2 will receive the benefit of the transitional funding arrangements agreed at the Berlin Summit.

Support under Objective 3 for training and the Rural Development Regulation will also be available in these areas as will other national and local programmes.

Oban Coastguard

13. **Mrs. Ray Michie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he had with the First Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister prior to the announcement of the closure of the Oban coastguard station. [101231]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend is in regular contact with the First Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister on a wide range of issues including matters relating to maritime safety and coastguard stations.

Oil Fabrication

14. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his liaison role in respect of the future of oil fabrication in the highlands and islands. [101232]

Mr. Wilson: I am, of course, extremely concerned about the impact of the job losses announced by Barmac, which I recently visited at the request of my hon. Friend, and the situation faced by all UK oil fabrication yards. These are issues being addressed by the Oil and Gas Industries Task Force, of which I am a member. As agreed at its meeting on 1 December, plans are already under way for a group to meet as soon as possible to clarify how they can together best help the industry adapt to the changes in the market.

16. **Mr. Charles Kennedy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has held with the oil industry on the future of North sea oil fabrication contracts; and if he will make a statement. [101234]

Mr. Wilson: I am a member of the Oil and Gas Industries Task Force, which includes industry representatives. The Task Force last met on 1 December. I also met representatives of the management and unions at Barmac last week.

I also refer the right hon. Gentleman to the reply I have just given to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart).

23. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive and the Treasury regarding future assistance for fabrication yards in the north of Scotland. [101241]

Mr. Wilson: I am a member of the Oil and Gas Industries Task Force which includes representatives from industry, trade unions, Government and the Scottish Executive. The Task Force is considering the issues being faced by all UK oil fabrication yards. I have recently visited the Barmac yard at Ardersier where I had useful discussions with the management and trade unions, along with Ministers from the Scottish Executive.

Ministerial Briefing

15. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland from which budgets briefing for Scottish Executive Ministers provided by United Kingdom Departments is paid for. [101233]

Dr. Reid: Extensive and balanced two-way exchange of information takes place continuously between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations under the provisions of the Memorandum of Understanding and the associated concordats. No reimbursements are sought for the limited costs associated with providing briefing for another Administration. The costs of setting up such a system would outweigh any minimal benefits.

Electricity

17. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the future regulation of the generation and supply of electricity in Scotland. [101235]

Mr. Wilson: Regulation of the electricity industry is a matter for the Director General of Gas and Electricity Supply. As part of the utility reform Bill, which was announced in the Queen's speech last month, the role of the regulator will be revised to put consumers at the heart of the regulatory process.

Defence Procurement

18. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact on the Scottish economy of the UK Government's defence procurement policies. [101236]

Dr. Reid: On the basis of the most recent figures available, defence expenditure in Scotland at approximately £1.9 billion supports, directly and indirectly, some 55,000 jobs. Clearly defence expenditure is both substantial and important to the Scottish economy.

Pre-Budget Statement

19. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the impact in Scotland of his pre-Budget statement. [101237]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend's pre-Budget Report contained significant new measures which will further assist Scotland's economy and improve employment opportunities and social justice. I welcome the benefit for Scotland from these and other measures announced by my right hon. Friend, including proposals for changes to the fuel duty regime and for consultation on the Air Passenger Duty.

New Deal

20. **Mr. Worthington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to extend the new deal to the over-40s. [101238]

Mr. Wilson: New Deal 50 Plus pathfinders commenced in October and will be rolled out across the whole country in April 2000. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his pre-Budget Report announced a package of measures to improve significantly New Deal 25 Plus.

Border Communities

21. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about ensuring the establishment of procedures for the co-ordination of policy and its implementation affecting communities on the English/Scottish border. [101239]

Dr. Reid: I regularly discuss a range of matters with the First Minister. Liaison arrangements established under the Memorandum of Understanding apply to all matters where co-ordination between the Administrations is sensible.

Higher Education

22. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to the Scottish Executive regarding its review of higher education policy. [101240]

Dr. Reid: The Scottish Executive is not reviewing higher education policy.

Anti-drugs Strategy

24. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has held with the First Minister on co-ordination of the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [101242]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend meets regularly with the First Minister and discusses a range of topics. The Government's anti-drugs strategy is on the agenda for their next meeting.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with HM Treasury on the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit in Scotland. [101225]

Dr. Reid: I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, which could benefit up to 140,000 families in Scotland.

Barnett Formula

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has had with the Treasury about the operation of the Barnett formula; and if he will make a statement. [101218]

Dr. Reid: I have had no discussions with the Treasury about the Barnett formula. The formula continues to provide a fair deal for Scotland within a United Kingdom framework and I have no plans to re-visit the underlying principles.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Solicitor-General what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102364]

The Solicitor-General: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussions.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Burundi

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on conditions in Burundi and the humanitarian response of the international community. [101523]

Clare Short: The UN estimates that over 800,000 people are currently internally displaced inside Burundi. This figure includes around 300,000 people forcibly regrouped into sites around the capital, Bujumbura, since September 1999. In addition, approximately 300,000 Burundians still live in neighbouring countries (mainly Tanzania) as refugees.

UN humanitarian operations in Burundi have been suspended since the killing of UN staff on 12 October. It is intended that humanitarian activities will resume as soon as effective security measures are assured.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development for each of the buildings under her Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102336]

Clare Short: One room in 94 Victoria Street and four rooms in Abercrombie House, East Kilbride are set aside for smokers. No rooms are allocated exclusively for religious or nursing mothers use although a rest room in 94 Victoria Street is available for these purposes as required.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what arrangements *(a)* she and *(b)* Ministers in her Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside her Department. [102371]

Clare Short: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what guidelines determine the prominence or otherwise of sponsors branding within the Millennium Dome. [99319]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* On 17 December 1998, my right hon. Friend the then Minister without Portfolio placed in the House Libraries the New Millennium Experience Company's (NMEC) "Outline Approach to Official Sponsors of the Dome". This document made clear that the NMEC at all times retains the ultimate right of control over the design, content and format of the exhibit zones in order to protect and maintain the integrity of the Millennium Experience and the company. This underpins NMEC's approach to sponsor branding and to the branding guidelines adopted and applied by NMEC. I have placed in the Libraries today a copy of NMEC's summary pamphlet "Sponsor Identity and branding related to zones" as an example of the company's approach.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many sponsors of the Millennium Dome have yet to sign binding contracts in respect of their announced sponsorship. [99339]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 December 1999]:* Final contractual documents for seven of the Millennium Experience's announced sponsors await signature. All issues of substance have been resolved and, subject to completion of formalities, the New Millennium Experience Company expects the documentation to be signed over the next couple of weeks. All remain fully committed at Board level. The sponsors concerned are BSkyB, which is a particularly complex agreement covering their sponsorship of Skyscape and a wide range of broadcast issues; Boots; Manpower; the Corporation of London (who as an indication of their commitment have made an advance payment of their sponsorship); Coca Cola; Mars Confectionary; and Thames Water.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been spent to date on promoting the sale of the Millennium Dome to potential purchasers; and what form these promotions are taking. [101617]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The competition to find a sustainable use for the Dome beyond the Millennium Experience is being managed on behalf of the Government by English Partnerships, the urban regeneration agency for England, in co-operation with the New Millennium Experience Company. Total spend to date on all aspects of the competition is £474,000. Promotion has taken the form of initial advertising; detailed information for potential bidders; and the public display of outline proposals.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) how many overseas visitors his Department estimates will visit Britain in 2000 for the main purpose of visiting the Millennium Dome; [101626]

(2) what estimate his Department has made of the number of overseas visitors who will visit the Millennium Dome in 2000. [101643]

Janet Anderson: The British Tourist Authority (BTA) has estimated the number of overseas visits to the UK in 2000 as 27.5 million. Of these NMEC foresee that 2.5 million will visit the Dome. The BTA has also suggested that as a direct result of the Millennium Experience an additional £300 million to £500 million of overseas tourist revenue will be brought into the UK economy. The "halo" effect could double this figure. The BTA have further estimated that 15,000–30,000 new tourism related jobs will be created.

Digital Television

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what assessment he has made of the impact of a digital television licence fee on the take-up of digital television services; [102416]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact of a digital television licence fee on levels of commercial investment in digital television technology; [102415]

(3) what assessment he has made of the effect of a digital television licence fee on the receipts from the sale of analogue broadcasting spectrum; [102410]

(4) what assessment he has made of the effect of a digital television licence fee on levels of commercial investment in digital television technology; [102414]

(5) what assessment he has made of the effect of a flat rate digital television licence fee on the effectiveness of Government policies to encourage social inclusion; [102413]

(6) what assessment he has made of the effect of a digital television licence fee on the proposed date for analogue switch off; [102412]

(7) what assessment he has made of the effect of a digital television licence fee on receipts from the sale of analogue broadcasting spectrum. [102411]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government will consider all the arguments for and against a digital licence supplement, including the responses to the public consultation and the wider policy implications, before reaching any decision on the recommendation of the Davies report. We shall announce our conclusions in January.

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102046]

Mr. Chris Smith: Four per cent. of my Department's workforce have declared themselves as having a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. My Department has taken a number of steps to encourage the employment of disabled people. All buildings occupied by DCMS staff are accessible to people with disabilities; all disabled job applicants who meet the necessary criteria are offered an interview; flexible working is available; guidance on working with disabled people has recently been issued to all staff; and hearing induction loops will shortly be installed in meeting rooms.

Television Licences (Over-75s)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if pensioners aged over 75 years who have already paid for a television licence will get a full refund of the unused part when the policy of free television licences for those aged over 75 years is implemented. [102123]

Janet Anderson: The Government anticipate that the scheme will incorporate arrangements for refunds in respect of unexpired licences. We intend to announce shortly full details of how the scheme will operate.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Probation Service

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to change the title of probation officers; and if he will make a statement; [102664]

(2) what the reasons were for changing the name of the Probation Service; and if he will make a statement; [102663]

(3) if he will list the organisations and individuals consulted on the name change of the Probation Service, and place their responses in the Library; [102666]

(4) if he will list the options considered for the new name of the Probation Service; [102665]

(5) if the Government evaluated the name, community justice service, as a replacement for the Probation Service. [102668]

Mr. Boateng: This Government are determined that punishment and rehabilitation of offenders in the community should be effective. We have embarked upon a major programme of modernisation that includes significant investment in programmes that are shown to work in reducing reoffending and revised National Standards for the Supervision of Offenders in the Community.

Bringing together the 54 probation services in England and Wales into a unified service organised in 42 areas sharing police and Crown Prosecution Service boundaries, as we shall do through the Crime and Public Protection Bill, is another major part of that modernisation programme. It is right that the name of the new service should reflect its main purpose—punishment and rehabilitation of offenders in order to reduce reoffending and protect the public. The Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service is, therefore, accurate and appropriate.

The consultation paper "Joining Forces to Protect the Public" invited suggestions for the name of a unified service. A list of the suggestions received is in the second list. Community Justice Service was one of those suggestions. Details of those who were sent copies of the consultation paper (excluding in response to requests for it from members of the public) are in the first list. It would not be right to make the responses to the consultation paper public as some of these were submitted in confidence.

We are currently considering new titles for probation officers and other staff. Changes will be made in the Crime and Public Protection Bill.

Organisations and persons sent copies of "Joining Forces to Protect the Public"

Association of Chief Officers of Probation
Association of Chief Police Officers
Central Probation Council
Chief Constables
Chief Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrates
Council of Circuit Judges
Government Officers for the Regions
HM Inspectorate of Probation
Judicial Studies Board
Justices' Clerks' Society
Lord Chief Justice
Magistrates' Association
Magistrates' Courts' Committees
NACRO
National Association of Probation Officers
Other Government Departments
Parliament
Probation Committees
Probation Managers' Association
Probation Services
The Press
UNISON

Names suggested for a unified service

Bureau of Community Punishment
Community Corrections and Protection Service
Community Corrections Service
Community Justice Agency
Community Justice Enforcement Agency
Community Justice Enforcement Service/Agency
Community Justice Service
Community Offender Bureau for Rehabilitation Action
Community Protection and Justice Service
Community Punishment and Re-education Service
Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service

Community Sanction Service
Community Sentence Enforcement Agency
Community Sentence Enforcement Service
Community Sentence Supervisory Agency
Correction Service
Corrections Service
Court Advice and Sentence Implementation Service
Court Enforcement Service
Court Order Enforcement Agency
Department of Community Punishment
Justice Enforcement Agency
Justice Enforcement and Public Protection Service
National Resettlement Service
Offender Control and Supervision Service
Offender Control Service
Offender Correction Service
Offender Management Service
Offender Monitoring Service
Offender Risk Management Service
Offender Supervision and Control
Offender Supervision Service
Offending Behaviour Correction Service
Probation Agency
Probation and Public Protection Service
Probation Service
Public Protection Service
Public Safety and Offender Management Service
Punishment and Rehabilitation Service
Remand Service
Sentence Enforcement
Sentence Enforcement Agency
Sentence Enforcement and Rehabilitation Agency.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the restrictions on who can be employed in probation work; and if he will make a statement. [102667]

Mr. Boateng: At present there are no centrally laid down restrictions on who can be employed in probation work. This is a matter for individual probation areas and I have no plans to introduce any restrictions on employment in the forthcoming legislation.

Prison Education Services

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was the total amount spent on prison education services in each Prison Service establishment and in total in *(a)* 1999 to date, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 1992; and if he will make a statement; [102660]

(2) what was the total amount spent on prison education services in each young offender institution and in total in *(a)* 1999 to date, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 1992; and if he will make a statement. [102657]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not available in the form requested. The tables set out actual annual expenditure for all prison establishments and for young offender institutions (including remand centres) on certain separately identifiable areas of education spend covering payments to education service providers and purchase of education materials divided by the average population for each prison in that year. These cover the years 1999–2000 (to 31 October), 1998–99, and 1997–98. Information for 1992–93 is not readily available. Information on education costs at private sector prisons is also not readily available.

£

Establishment	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000 to end of October*
Acklington	221,254	229,400	199,237
Albany	154,493	172,037	108,310
Aldington	131,901	131,333	51,158
Ashwell	333,097	359,680	224,277
Askham Grange	128,121	142,894	95,290
Aylesbury	414,477	522,455	385,827
Bedford	200,861	204,989	164,938
Belmarsh	416,002	440,854	313,102
Birmingham	198,933	199,999	167,562
Blantyre House	180,387	159,433	95,215
Blundeston	242,056	244,169	162,173
Brinsford	169,250	242,237	147,643
Bristol	163,168	153,388	108,675
Brixton	439,283	312,580	263,594
Brockhill	160,306	174,391	86,789
Bullingdon	484,710	512,312	359,718
Bullwood Hall	205,394	233,355	161,932
Camp Hill	358,715	352,129	183,083
Canterbury	150,460	134,907	86,726
Cardiff	183,070	212,610	125,973
Castington	241,468	256,167	206,893
Channings Wood	361,684	361,226	211,608
Chelmsford	166,412	185,244	138,894
Coldingley	160,373	191,468	114,155
Cookham Wood	132,886	131,159	83,003
Dartmoor	366,781	426,377	168,838
Deerbolt	326,118	422,119	310,883
Dorchester	97,718	130,048	95,483
Dover	151,139	157,403	148,926
Downview	219,615	206,700	109,652
Drake Hall	159,664	156,929	114,351
Durham	353,434	355,476	228,092
East Sutton Park	93,798	85,966	62,812
Eastwood Park	175,309	226,694	120,716
Elmley	255,479	391,782	312,174
Erlestoke	298,786	309,072	205,745
Everthorpe	437,524	443,146	194,167
Exeter	129,686	154,440	122,007
Featherstone	175,085	181,350	151,311
Feltham	467,272	592,115	358,133
Ford	275,237	260,074	159,879
Foston Hall	136,026	230,688	119,968
Frankland	272,614	350,257	216,084
Full Sutton	474,483	467,432	239,168
Garth	387,834	423,618	245,984
Gartree	216,308	208,846	122,052
Glen Parva	439,155	553,878	293,217
Gloucester	208,983	252,051	153,048
Grendon	347,897	393,318	270,834
Guys Marsh	258,675	359,457	210,523
Haslar	120,566	136,942	60,333
Hatfield	225,136	224,478	116,568
Haverigg	300,190	275,718	135,661
Hewell Grange	151,917	153,081	100,319
High Down	331,519	407,265	242,351
Highpoint	506,037	578,123	389,826
Hindley	727,324	624,206	413,931
Hollesley Bay Colony	355,017	359,530	235,191
Holloway	378,720	433,770	332,554
Holme House	572,000	382,409	186,966
Hull	339,918	375,372	164,391
Huntercombe	317,543	402,591	336,490

£

Establishment	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000 to end of October
Kingston	89,433	106,748	50,851
Kirkham	231,985	242,505	134,998
Kirklevington Grange	55,254	36,554	17,678
Lancaster Castle	164,931	171,845	106,153
Lancaster Farms	458,279	564,437	402,644
Latchmere House	19,200	18,524	8,428
Leeds	423,071	551,235	328,781
Leicester	196,154	201,636	172,787
Lewes	273,268	276,099	188,021
Leyhill	245,758	241,674	116,171
Lincoln	223,010	220,840	132,742
Lindholme	420,619	445,630	297,259
Littlehey	421,407	395,780	172,366
Liverpool	332,483	365,870	234,861
Long Lartin	231,556	200,300	138,474
Low Newton	344,571	360,377	135,473
Maidstone	203,762	195,777	138,528
Manchester	469,093	557,039	223,562
Moorland	690,263	829,616	468,568
Morton Hall	188,281	191,851	115,799
Mount (The)	363,039	377,489	279,844
New Hall	301,792	376,651	203,357
North Sea Camp	127,629	126,023	81,582
Northallerton	236,165	279,352	182,637
Norwich	394,551	417,911	316,118
Nottingham	257,487	250,387	177,782
Onley	455,448	570,060	306,998
Parkhurst	223,022	253,595	180,810
Pentonville	264,547	318,295	271,181
Portland	443,838	500,700	318,067
Preston	239,086	265,367	170,935
Ranby	371,069	410,498	263,056
Reading	142,489	136,296	124,992
Risley	570,694	593,435	337,621
Rochester	148,332	190,179	135,930
Send	140,706	126,692	89,383
Shepton Mallet	205,271	184,749	136,760
Shrewsbury	114,680	121,260	89,901
Stafford	281,778	261,845	230,618
Standford Hill	195,736	204,993	1262,884
Stocken	354,972	393,849	224,106
Stoke Heath	293,701	482,394	321,126
Styal	232,578	277,910	202,514
Sudbury	382,181	399,954	200,014
Swaleside	328,888	351,168	203,923
Swansea	143,054	130,088	106,189
Swinfen Hall	211,735	331,556	200,430
Thorn Cross	484,351	511,470	244,581
Usk/Prescoed	375,878	362,278	212,426
Verne (The)	218,575	211,964	125,213
Wakefield	341,074	359,617	210,409
Wandsworth	224,312	226,969	203,016
Wayland	424,069	413,968	273,951
Wealstun	373,096	343,721	204,275
Weare (The)	161,013	318,446	185,086
Wellingborough	221,572	227,327	184,518
Werrington	190,633	201,345	122,702
Wetherby	433,918	497,377	302,467
Whatton	304,132	298,068	225,381
Whitemoor	400,114	432,700	265,858
Winchester	306,592	323,249	186,364
Woodhill	490,961	486,963	367,588
Wormwood Scrubs	289,530	280,952	181,718
Wymott	405,685	399,012	259,746
Total	35,801,619	38,755,594	24,551,604

£

Young Offender Establishment	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000 to end of October
Aylesbury	414,477	522,455	385,827
Brinsford	169,250	242,237	147,643
Castington	241,468	256,167	206,893
Deerbolt	326,118	422,119	310,883
Dover	151,139	157,403	148,926
Feltham	467,272	592,115	358,133
Glen Parva	439,155	553,878	293,217
Guys Marsh	258,675	359,457	210,523
Hatfield	225,136	224,478	116,568
Hindley	727,324	624,206	413,931
Huntercombe	317,543	402,591	336,490
Lancaster Farms	458,279	564,437	402,644
Northallerton	236,165	279,352	182,637
Onley	455,448	570,060	306,998
Portland	443,838	500,700	318,067
Reading	142,489	136,296	124,992
Stoke Heath	293,701	482,394	321,126
Swinfen Hall	211,735	331,556	200,430
Thorn Cross	484,351	511,470	244,581
Werrington	190,633	201,345	122,702
Wetherby	433,918	497,377	302,467
Total	7,088,114	8,432,092	5,455,678

European Convention on Human Rights

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will ensure that a statement of compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights is made by Ministers in all secondary legislation; and if he will make a statement. [102654]

Mr. Straw: The Government have decided that, from the beginning of the current session, a Minister inviting Parliament to approve a draft statutory instrument or statutory instrument subject to affirmative resolution should always volunteer his or her view regarding its compatibility with the Convention rights. The Minister's view should also always be given regarding the incompatibility of any secondary legislation to the extent that it amends primary legislation; and that statement should be made in writing where the secondary legislation which amends primary legislation is not subject to affirmative resolution. The written statement should be made in whatever form seems appropriate, for example, in a letter to the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy for Departments to publish their assessments of the impact of the European Convention on Human Rights on all proposed new legislation; and if he will make a statement. [102670]

Mr. Straw: Under section 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998, the Minister responsible for a Bill must certify in full whether or not in his or her view the Bill is compatible with the provisions of the Act. This section is already in force. In addition, the Government now have decided that a Minister in charge of a Bill should be ready in debate to explain his or her thinking on the compatibility of particular provisions of the Bill with the Convention rights. The Minister should be ready to give a general outline of the arguments which led him or

her to the conclusion reflected in the statement made under section 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998 in relation to the particular provision.

Trial by Jury

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 125W, on trial by jury, if he will give a full breakdown of where the estimated savings to the criminal justice system from the Government's proposals to limit the right of defendants to elect for jury trial will be made, including savings to *(a)* the courts and *(b)* the Prison Service; and if he will make a statement. [102649]

Mr. Straw: For the courts, there would be annual resource savings of £12 million on committals and £36 million on Crown Court trials which would no longer take place. This would be offset by the cost of magistrates courts trials (£8 million, including the cost of any subsequent committals for sentence), and the cost (estimated at £0.5 million) of interlocutory appeals to the Crown Court. Resource savings for the Prison Service, estimated at £66 million annually, would result from the shorter custodial sentences imposed by magistrates courts.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 244W, concerning jury trials, if the material requested has been prepared; and if he will make a statement. [102650]

Mr. Straw: The available information, drawn from two sources, is given in the table:

Defendants proceeded against for triable either way offences, 1989–98

Year	Number of defendants convicted or acquitted following summary trial [1]	Number of defendants committed for trial [1]	Percentage of committals for trial resulting from defendants' elections [2]
1989	270,695	81,973	42
1990	277,916	82,026	39
1991	277,407	82,643	36
1992	267,341	74,902	37
1993	257,955	66,643	35
1994	263,041	69,528	35
1995	244,877	61,133	33
1996	243,860	61,215	32
1997	258,393	66,456	28
1998	291,785	51,952	28

[1] Source: Home Office Court Proceedings Database
[2] CPS prosecutions only. Source: Crown Prosecution Service statistics.

Quantum Project

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will announce the outcome of the Invitation to Tender for the Prison Service's Quantum Project. [102974]

Mr. Boateng: The Invitation to Tender for the Quantum Project, for an information technology infrastructure service, joint development of a strategy for information technology-based business change and an agreed mechanism for implementing business change on a partnership basis, was issued on 25 September. The short-listed companies provided their submissions in response to the Invitation to Tender on 8 November.

Following thorough evaluation against commercial and, separately, qualitative criteria, Martin Narey, Director General of the Prison Service, has selected the tender of Electronic Data Systems (EDS) as the one which is the most economically advantageous to the Prison Service based on the best combination of deliverability, quality, risk transfer and cost. The Prison Service and EDS will now commence preferred supplier negotiations with a view to award of contract.

Kosovar Refugees

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Kosovar refugees are currently in the UK; and, of those, how many *(a)* are seeking and *(b)* have been granted asylum. [101961]

Mrs. Roche: It is estimated that as at the end of March 1999, the latest date for which detailed figures are available, the number of asylum applications awaiting an initial decision for nationals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was 9,540.

In the period January 1997 to May 1999 a total of 5,190 nationals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were recognised as refugees and granted asylum. A further 905 were not recognised as refugees but granted exceptional leave to enter or remain.

I regret that it is not possible to identify Kosovars separately within the available statistics for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

4,346 Kosovars arrived in the United Kingdom under the United Nations High Commission for Refugees Humanitarian Evacuation Programme (HEP) between 25 April and 25 June with a further 68 arrivals on subsequent medical flights. As at 2 December 1999, 1,319 Kosovars (including 25 per cent. of those evacuated under the HEP) had returned voluntarily.

Drug Testing (Animals)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the use of animals in drug testing, with particular reference to those used in anxiety models for drugs; and if he will make a statement. [102252]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The use of animals in drug testing is kept under review and each project licence application is considered on its individual merits. Licences are issued only after the likely benefits (to man, animals or the environment) have been weighed against the costs to the animals involved and if there are no alternatives which replace animal use, reduce the number of animals needed or refine the experimental design to minimise suffering. The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate advises on whether, and on what terms, licences and certificates should be granted or amended.

Various licences have been granted in the United Kingdom to assess the efficacy and safety of pharmaceutical agents or study the mechanisms of addiction but none can be described as models for lifestyle drugs.

Prison Service Drug Strategy

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 239W, on the Prison Service drug strategy, if he will list those Prison Service establishments where CARAT services are available; if he will list the expected dates for the roll-out of services to those Prison Service establishments where roll-out is not complete; and if he will make a statement. [102651]

Mr. Boateng: The roll-out of Counselling Assessment Referral Advice Throughcare services in each prison will be completed by the end of January.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 239W, on the Prison Service drug strategy, how many staff have been recruited per Prison Service establishment and in total; how many vacancies there are to fill per establishment and in total; and if he will make a statement. [102652]

Mr. Boateng: Approximately 200 new members of staff have been recruited to support Counselling Assessment Referral Advice Throughcare services. Information on the number of workers recruited per establishment and on the number of vacancies to be filled per establishment is not held centrally.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate the Prison Service has made of the total cost over three years of the Prison Service CARAT drug strategy; what is the breakdown of the estimate; and if he will make a statement. [102653]

Mr. Boateng: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 239W.

Prisoners (Purposeful Activity)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average number of hours of purposeful activity by each prisoner in each week in each Prison Service establishment and in total in *(a)* 1999 to date, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 1992; and if he will make a statement. [102659]

Mr. Boateng: The average weekly number of purposeful activity hours per prisoner for each establishment and in total for the financial years in question are given in the table.

The table excludes establishments where data for the complete period are not available.

Purposeful activity 1992–93, 1997–98, 1998–99, April 1999-October 1999

Prison name	*1992–93*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Acklington	26.3	25.5	23.8	23.9
Albany	—	24.0	23.8	23.7
Aldington	33.0	30.4	28.1	26.7
Altcourse	32.8	—	20.5	24.8
Ashwell	—	32.6	33.3	31.3
Askham Grange	22.4	41.8	42.0	39.8
Aylesbury	20.3	22.6	20.9	18.2
Bedford	14.0	25.6	22.7	22.9
Belmarsh	16.3	11.8	13.2	12.5
Birmingham	—	10.9	13.3	14.7
Blakenhurst	29.9	20.1	21.8	22.1
Blantyre House	21.2	34.2	39.6	41.7
Blundeston	17.2	23.2	25.8	24.9
Brinsford	20.2	15.3	16.3	17.3
Bristol	10.6	20.1	21.3	20.2
Brixton	—	17.1	15.7	9.1
Brockhill	19.2	30.7	21.1	16.5
Buckley Hall	—	32.8	26.6	31.2
Bullingdon	19.5	20.9	21.2	14.6
Bullwood Hall	25.6	21.6	19.1	20.3
Camp Hill	24.8	20.9	19.3	18.9
Canterbury	21.0	17.5	18.5	18.8
Cardiff	22.8	22.0	21.3	20.6
Castington	26.1	23.4	20.7	19.8
Channings Wood	16.7	29.6	30.5	34.0
Chelmsford	28.5	16.0	15.8	16.2
Coldingly	26.2	38.1	40.7	42.3
Cookham Wood	20.4	23.6	22.3	24.5
Dartmoor	24.3	18.8	18.9	20.8
Deerbolt	20.9	21.7	19.9	20.8
Doncaster	—	16.7	17.0	18.5
Dorchester	25.7	16.2	14.4	14.6
Dover	25.3	21.7	21.2	23.4
Downview	37.9	31.5	30.8	29.8
Drake Hall	13.5	35.1	34.9	35.8
Durham	36.2	16.7	20.2	19.1
East Sutton Park	—	38.4	40.1	41.4
Eastwood Park	—	19.7	21.6	21.4
Elmley	26.6	19.0	20.2	20.7
Erlestoke	23.8	29.0	27.2	29.2
Everthorpe	—	25.8	27.0	27.0
Exeter	30.2	17.9	13.6	12.4
Featherstone	11.0	23.7	24.7	26.1
Feltham	35.9	19.6	15.5	15.2
Ford	21.8	33.7	35.6	39.6
Foston Hall	—	—	23.4	25.4
Frankland	20.4	17.0	18.4	19.6
Full Sutton	20.8	18.0	17.6	21.5
Garth	29.5	21.0	21.3	21.3
Gartree	—	26.5	27.0	28.1
Glen Parva	15.8	16.5	16.7	16.8
Gloucester	25.3	20.6	26.4	29.5
Grendon	39.9	33.3	34.2	34.7
Guys Marsh	25.5	30.9	22.8	26.8
Haslar	36.9	21.4	18.8	19.0
Hatfield	34.2	37.2	32.5	41.0
Haverigg	40.5	33.8	33.9	34.1
Hewell Grange	24.5	41.2	42.7	41.5
Highdown	—	15.7	13.9	16.0
Highpoint	17.4	17.7	23.2	21.8
Hindley	28.4	20.1	23.8	23.2
Hollesley Bay	20.2	28.1	28.1	33.8
Holloway	17.8	18.7	17.6	10.2
Holme House	—	16.0	15.8	16.4
Hull	21.4	18.6	20.0	21.9
Huntercombe	25.7	25.1	23.8	25.5
Kingston	44.7	28.6	23.9	23.5
Kirkham	—	54.8	43.5	43.8
Kirklevington	26.7	48.8	50.1	52.1
Lancaster	21.9	22.8	20.7	21.6
Lancaster Farms	—	22.4	20.5	20.2
Latchmere House	16.4	72.7	70.2	76.5
Leeds	18.2	15.5	14.8	14.0
Leicester	14.1	21.4	20.5	19.7
Lewes	41.0	18.5	18.5	17.8
Leyhill	22.7	38.6	39.0	38.5
Lincoln	23.6	19.6	22.9	24.7
Lindholme	28.0	25.3	24.2	26.7
Littlehey	18.2	29.8	26.0	25.9
Liverpool	19.9	16.5	19.0	22.5
Long Lartin	19.6	15.6	17.0	16.4
Low Newton	19.1	21.7	20.2	23.9
Lowdham Grange	—	—	25.2	25.4

Purposeful activity 1992–93, 1997–98, 1998–99, April 1999-October 1999

Prison name	*1992–93*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Maidstone	17.6	22.5	21.3	22.8
Manchester	19.6	29.4	26.7	22.9
Moorland	41.8	25.3	24.0	22.8
Morton Hall	27.1	39.1	37.9	41.7
Mount	33.2	18.4	18.0	19.1
New Hall	—	22.9	23.7	23.1
North Sea Camp	25.8	42.4	45.0	41.7
Northallerton	22.5	14.7	14.5	14.9
Norwich	24.9	18.1	18.0	18.2
Nottingham	24.3	18.1	15.3	20.6
Onley	20.4	20.0	18.4	17.5
Parc	—	—	30.0	46.7
Parkhurst	20.7	20.1	19.5	20.8
Pentonville	23.8	19.6	20.3	19.9
Portland	19.1	29.4	23.1	23.0
Preston	—	17.4	17.1	15.9
Ranby	22.0	30.2	26.4	25.7
Reading	26.5	24.2	23.8	29.5
Risley	22.8	22.7	21.9	22.5
Rochester	33.9	18.7	19.1	17.8
Send	24.2	35.1	40.7	33.5
Shepton Mallet	20.2	23.7	22.7	20.7
Shrewsbury	17.8	21.4	22.7	22.6
Stafford	38.0	25.0	22.4	23.6
Standford Hill	29.6	43.8	44.1	39.5
Stocken	27.7	27.1	23.2	22.2
Stoke Heath	29.8	21.6	21.6	22.2
Styal	46.0	28.6	28.7	16.9
Sudbury	21.1	47.2	44.5	43.9
Swaleside	18.8	22.0	22.3	22.4
Swansea	31.2	15.0	20.0	20.6
Swinfen Hall	41.2	25.5	28.9	30.5
Thorn Cross	31.5	50.3	50.3	46.2
Usk	28.4	35.5	34.9	37.3
Verne	19.1	30.9	27.2	32.7
Wakefield	17.0	17.8	18.2	20.2
Wandsworth	26.3	22.0	18.9	17.6
Wayland	36.7	24.6	24.0	24.5
Wealstun	28.2	33.7	30.6	33.4
Weare	—	—	20.8	21.0
Wellinborough	41.4	25.1	24.9	25.5
Werrington	33.0	36.5	24.0	37.1
Wetherby	33.1	29.5	28.3	27.7
Whatton	13.7	30.6	28.8	30.1
Whitemoor	22.3	18.5	19.6	21.5
Winchester	—	17.2	15.7	15.6
Wolds	—	31.0	29.1	29.4
Woodhill	14.8	20.9	19.8	17.7
Wormwood Scrubs	28.6	13.6	14.2	17.2
Wymott	—	34.4	28.7	30.3

Service purposeful activity

	Purposeful activity	*Target*
1992–93	23.7	—
1997–98	23.3	22.5
1998–99	22.8	24
April-October 1999	23.1	24

Clear-up Rates

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of cleared-up crime was committed by *(a)* males under 18, *(b)* males between 18 and 25, *(c)* males over 25, *(d)* females under 18, *(e)* females between 18 and 25 and *(f)* females over 25 in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [102655]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The statistics on cleared up crime are not collected centrally by age or sex. However, the Cautions and Court Proceedings Databases contain details of persons cautioned or convicted by age and sex from which the figures in the table have been derived.

Persons cautioned or convicted for an indictable offence by age and sex in 1998—England and Wales

	Total	*Expressed as a percentage of all persons cautioned or convicted*
Males		
Aged 10 to 17	99,027	19
Aged 18 to 25	166,795	31
Aged 26 or over	170,034	32
All males	435,856	82
Females		
Aged 10 to 17	27,891	5
Aged 18 to 25	29,992	6
Aged 26 or over	38,253	7
All females	96,136	18
All persons		
Aged 10 to 17	126,918	24
Aged 18 to 25	196,787	37
Aged 26 or over	208,287	39
All persons	531,992	100

Prisoner Behaviour

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total number of *(a)* incidents of concerted indiscipline, *(b)* incidents of self harm and *(c)* suicides in each Prison Service establishment and in total in (i) 1999 to date, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1997 and (iv) 1992; and if he will make a statement. [102658]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in tables which have been placed in the Library.

The Government are committed to doing everything possible to try to reduce the number of self-inflicted deaths and incidents of self-harm in prisons. The Prison Service is developing a whole range of additional measures to address this issue and to provide further help and protection to those considered to be at risk of self-harm; this work is being informed by the recommendations of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons' Thematic Review published in May of this year.

The Prison Service is also increasing the involvement of external interest groups through a regular working group and in projects and research into suicides. There has been for some time a close working relationship with the Samaritans who have a great deal of expertise in this area. Listener schemes, whereby prisoners offer support to fellow prisoners in crisis, are now established in over 100 prisons in England and Wales, the majority of which are supported by the Samaritans.

In addition, instructions and guidance to staff on caring for the suicidal are being re-examined and drawn together in a new Prison Service Order (PSO) which it is hoped will be ready for issue in April 2000. This will highlight good practice and strengthen strategies to provide care for those prisoners at risk.

There has been a substantial decrease in the number of concerted acts of indiscipline since 1992 (other than a brief rise in 1998). The Prison Service routinely monitors trends to detect any increase in the seriousness and frequency of acts of indiscipline. In the meantime, it continues to develop control and restraint techniques to ensure that staff can respond effectively to these incidents when they occur.

Police Officers

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish the figures for *(a)* the number of police officers per police force and in total on 30 September, *(b)* the change in the number of police officers per force and in total between September 1998 and September 1999 and *(c)* the change in the number of police officers per force and in total between March 1997 and September 1999; and if he will make a statement. [102669]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the numbers of police officers in England and Wales as at 30 September 1999 is not yet available. We hope to release the information requested in January, once the data for September 1999 are complete and have been validated.

Curfew Orders

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the rules are governing the employment of responsible officers for the monitoring of curfew orders; and if he will make a statement. [102656]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Three private sector contractors provide the electronic monitoring service in England and Wales. This includes the Home Detention Curfew scheme, the monitoring of curfew orders under the Criminal Justice Act 1991, which became available throughout England and Wales on 1 December, and the existing trials of curfew orders under the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997.

Responsible officers are employees of the electronic monitoring contractors. Approval is required from the Home Office prior to the appointment of any member of staff. Such approval is subject to security vetting by the National Information Service and, where appropriate, the Department of Health.

For the purposes of curfew orders, each contractor designates employees who act as responsible officers for those offenders receiving a curfew order. More than one employee can be designated as a responsible officer. Responsible officers are responsible before the courts for the monitoring of those subject to a curfew order, and for attending court to make applications for summons, warrants, revocations and amendments to the order, to report violations, to present evidence for enforcement action and other matters as necessary.

Police Force Expenditure

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* as planned for 2000–01, was the (i) cash change, (ii) real terms change and (iii) real terms change from the previous year in each case after taking into account the cost of police pensions, in each case, for each police force and in total; and if he will make a statement. [102648]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information in respect of 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000, which has been compiled from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's Police Statistics, is set out in the tables. Information in respect of 2000–01 is not yet available as police authorities have not yet set their budgets for that year.

Police force net expenditure, and percentage change in cash terms 1997–98 to 1999–2000

	1997–98		*1998–99*		*1999–2000*	
	£000	*(±%)*	*£000*	*(±%)*	*£000*	*(±%)*
Avon and Somerset	152,673	0.4	167,417	9.7	174,424	4.2
Bedfordshire	58,570	3.4	62,317	6.4	64,027	2.7
Cambridgeshire	68,681	5.6	71,230	3.7	75,363	5.8
Cheshire	104,005	10.4	106,523	2.4	111,094	4.3
City of London	57,893	1.0	60,862	5.1	58,719	–3.5
Cleveland	75,426	3.2	82,282	9.1	85,397	3.8
Cumbria	61,709	8.5	63,000	2.1	64,693	2.7
Derbyshire	95,641	5.8	100,894	5.5	107,035	6.1
Devon and Cornwall	155,435	3.4	167,117	7.5	173,649	3.9
Dorset	69,727	2.8	73,497	5.4	77,749	5.8
Durham	75,166	10.5	78,103	3.9	80,712	3.3
Dyfed-Powys	50,952	6.4	52,609	3.3	56,143	6.7
Essex	157,487	4.0	168,889	7.2	171,590	1.6
Gloucestershire	58,633	0.4	63,780	8.8	65,933	3.4
Greater Manchester	353,319	3.6	371,497	5.1	387,256	4.2
Gwent	64,598	11.9	67,919	5.1	71,414	5.1
Hampshire	180,791	4.6	190,920	5.6	196,955	3.2
Hertfordshire	93,011	4.7	97,589	5.2	102,361	4.6
Humberside	106,220	6.5	111,587	5.1	114,306	2.4
Kent	174,211	7.8	178,916	2.7	186,225	4.1
Lancashire	169,275	4.6	178,051	5.2	182,679	2.6
Leicestershire	98,789	6.4	102,707	4.0	106,279	3.5
Lincolnshire	66,184	7.6	68,322	3.2	69,970	2.4
Merseyside	224,327	1.4	245,277	9.3	249,522	1.7
Metropolitan Police	1,676,617	–0.4	1,778,001	6.0	1,840,245	3.5
Norfolk	80,222	6.2	82,339	2.6	86,870	5.5
Northamptonshire	64,605	9.0	67,134	3.9	70,432	4.9
Northumbria	195,092	4.7	205,380	5.3	213,010	3.7

Police force net expenditure, and percentage change in cash terms 1997–98 to 1999–2000

	1997–98		1998–99		1999–2000	
	£000	(±%)	£000	(±%)	£000	(±%)
North Wales	70,920	3.9	75,075	5.9	80,505	7.2
North Yorkshire	71,840	7.2	75,638	5.3	78,085	3.2
Nottinghamshire	120,556	6.1	124,828	3.5	130,173	4.3
South Wales	159,411	8.1	163,430	2.5	169,968	4.0
South Yorkshire	166,027	10.0	168,205	1.3	173,933	3.4
Staffordshire	110,264	2.3	122,540	11.1	127,472	4.0
Suffolk	63,676	4.5	65,785	3.3	70,538	7.2
Surrey	90,976	6.6	90,738	–0.3	100,375	10.6
Sussex	157,631	4.7	162,664	3.2	165,804	1.9
Thames Valley	210,333	4.4	221,147	5.1	232,729	5.2
Warwickshire	51,003	7.0	53,617	5.1	56,157	4.7
West Mercia	107,788	5.6	112,879	4.7	116,490	3.2
West Midlands	360,129	6.5	372,296	3.4	380,971	2.3
West Yorkshire	281,745	6.2	280,739	–0.4	288,865	2.9
Wiltshire	58,535	–2.4	66,666	13.9	69,715	4.6
Total	6,870,093	3.8	7,220,676	5.1	7,485,832	3.7

Police force net expenditure, and percentage change in real terms 1997–98 to 1999–2000

	1997–98		1998–99		1999–2000	
	£000	(±%)	£000	(±%)	£000	(±%)
Avon and Somerset	152,673	–2.3	167,417	6.9	174,424	1.9
Bedfordshire	58,570	0.6	62,317	3.8	64,027	0.5
Cambridgeshire	68,681	2.8	71,230	1.1	75,363	3.5
Cheshire	104,005	7.4	106,523	–0.1	111,094	2.0
City of London	57,893	–1.7	60,862	2.5	58,719	–5.6
Cleveland	75,426	0.4	82,282	6.4	85,397	1.5
Cumbria	61,709	5.6	63,000	–0.4	64,693	0.4
Derbyshire	95,641	2.9	100,894	2.9	107,035	3.8
Devon and Cornwall	155,435	0.6	167,117	4.9	173,649	1.6
Dorset	69,727	0.0	73,497	2.8	77,749	3.5
Durham	75,166	7.5	78,103	1.3	80,712	1.1
Dyfed-Powys	50,952	3.6	52,609	0.7	56,143	4.4
Essex	157,487	1.2	168,889	4.6	171,590	–0.6
Gloucestershire	58,633	–2.4	63,780	6.1	65,933	1.1
Greater Manchester	353,319	0.8	371,497	2.5	387,256	1.9
Gwent	64,598	8.8	67,919	2.5	71,414	2.8
Hampshire	180,791	1.8	190,920	3.0	196,955	0.9
Hertfordshire	93,011	1.8	97,859	2.6	102,361	2.3
Humberside	106,220	3.6	111,587	2.5	114,306	0.2
Kent	174,211	4.9	178,916	0.2	186,225	1.8
Lancashire	169,275	1.7	178,051	2.6	182,679	0.3
Leicestershire	98,789	3.5	102,707	1.4	106,279	1.2
Lincolnshire	66,184	4.7	68,322	0.7	69,970	0.2
Merseyside	224,327	–1.3	245,277	6.6	249,522	–0.5
Metropolitan Police	1,676,617	–3.1	1,778,001	3.4	1,840,245	1.2
Norfolk	80,222	3.3	82,339	0.1	86,870	3.2
Northamptonshire	64,605	6.1	67,134	1.3	70,432	2.6
Northumbria	195,092	1.8	205,380	2.7	213,010	1.4
North Wales	70,920	1.1	75,075	3.2	80,505	4.9
North Yorkshire	71,840	4.3	75,638	2.7	78,085	1.0
Nottinghamshire	120,556	3.3	124,828	1.0	130,173	2.0
South Wales	159,411	5.2	163,430	0.0	169,968	1.7
South Yorkshire	166,027	7.0	168,205	–1.2	173,933	1.1
Staffordshire	110,264	–0.5	122,540	8.4	127,472	1.7
Suffolk	63,676	1.6	65,785	0.8	70,538	4.9
Surrey	90,976	3.7	90,738	–2.7	375	8.2
Sussex	157,631	1.8	162,664	0.6	165,804	–0.3
Thames Valley	210,333	1.6	221,147	2.5	232,729	2.9
Warwickshire	51,003	4.1	53,617	2.5	56,157	2.4
West Mercia	107,788	2.7	112,879	2.1	116,490	0.9
West Midlands	360,129	3.7	372,296	0.8	380,971	0.1
West Yorkshire	281,745	3.3	280,739	–2.8	288,865	0.6
Wiltshire	58,535	–5.1	66,666	11.1	69,715	2.3
Total	6,870,093	1.0	7,220,676	2.5	7,485,832	1.4

Notes:

1997–98—CIPFA Police Statistics Actuals

1998–99 and 1999–2000 CIPFA Police Statistics Estimates

Police force net expenditure 1997–98 to 1999–2000: Percentage increase in real terms excluding pensions expenditure

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Avon and Somerset	–4.0	6.8	1.6
Bedfordshire	–1.6	4.2	–1.5
Cambridgeshire	1.7	1.1	1.8
Cheshire	4.0	0.4	0.3
City of London	–3.0	1.5	–6.3
Cleveland	1.5	3.3	–2.8
Cumbria	5.7	–1.6	–.06
Derbyshire	2.0	2.1	3.3
Devon and Cornwall	–0.5	4.5	1.0
Dorset	–2.0	2.9	1.5
Durham	1.6	6.1	3.4
Dyfed-Powys	4.0	–0.5	4.0
Essex	0.0	3.9	–0.9
Gloucestershire	–1.8	4.7	1.8
Greater Manchester	–2.3	3.2	1.2
Gwent	6.6	3.1	3.2
Hampshire	1.7	1.9	0.1
Hertfordshire	1.0	2.5	–0.6
Humberside	1.0	3.6	–1.6
Kent	2.1	–0.1	0.4
Lancashire	1.4	2.9	0.2
Leicestershire	n/a	n/a	1.2
Lincolnshire	3.1	–0.2	–1.5
Merseyside	–0.3	6.3	–0.7
Metropolitan Police	–4.4	2.9	0.2
Norfolk	2.9	1.3	2.2
Northamptonshire	0.0	2.1	5.1
Northumbria	3.8	0.9	2.0
North Wales	2.7	3.5	1.0
North Yorkshire	0.8	3.1	1.2
Nottinghamshire	0.1	2.2	1.4
South Wales	0.6	2.9	2.8
South Yorkshire	2.8	1.0	0.4
Staffordshire	–3.9	7.1	3.7
Suffolk	1.5	1.2	4.0
Surrey	–0.9	–0.7	9.6
Sussex	1.2	–1.3	–1.1
Thames Valley Police	0.1	3.4	2.0
Warwickshire	–1.7	5.3	–0.9
West Mercia	1.8	2.3	–0.3
West Midlands	1.3	1.7	–0.5
West Yorkshire	1.6	–3.0	–0.5
Wiltshire	–2.3	10.2	2.0
Total	–0.5	2.3	0.6

Privatised Ports Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if HM Inspectorate of Constabulary will conduct an inspection into the proposals to revise the size and management of the Port of Tilbury Police and its implications for the independence of each officer in the fulfilment of his or her duties as a constable. [102437]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary of the Port of Tilbury Police—or indeed, any other non-Home Office police force—must be by the prior invitation of the force. There has been no such invitation from the force.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when HM Inspectorate of Constabulary last inspected the Northern Ireland Airport Police. [102439]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary of the Northern Ireland Airport Police—or indeed, any other non-Home Office police force—must be by the prior invitation of the force. No inspection has taken place as there has been no such invitation from the force.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if HM Inspectorate of Constabulary will conduct an inspection into the management of the Port of Liverpool Police in relation to the capacity of each officer in the fulfilment of his or her duties as a constable. [102438]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary of the Port of Liverpool Police—or indeed, any other non-Home Office police force—must be by the prior invitation of the force. There has been no such invitation from the Port of Liverpool Police since 1978.

Asylum Seekers

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have applied for political asylum in the United Kingdom in each of the five most recent 12 month periods; how many of those applicants in each year have had their request rejected; and how many have been deported in consequence. [102626]

Mrs. Roche: The requested information is given in the tables.

Applications for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and decisions, 1995–99

			Cases considered under normal procedures			*Backlog clearance exercise*	
	Total applications	*Total decisions* [1,2]	*Recognised as a refugee and granted asylum*	*Not recognised as a refugee but granted exceptional leave*	*Total refusals*	*Granted exceptional leave under backlog criteria* [3,4]	*Refused on non compliance grounds under backlog criteria* [3,5]
1995	43,965	27,005	1,295	4,410	21,300	n/a	n/a
1996	29,640	38,960	2,240	5,055	31,670	n/a	n/a
1997	32,500	36,045	3,985	3,115	28,945	n/a	n/a
1998	46,015	31,570	5,345	3,910	22,315	n/a	n/a
1999[6]	66,945	30,940	7,135	2,150	10,970	9,595	1,095

[1] Decisions do not necessarily relate to applications made in the same period.
[2] Information is of initial decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.
[3] Cases decided under pragmatic measures aimed at reducing the pre 1996 asylum application backlog.
[4] Includes a small number of cases where asylum has been granted.
[5] Includes a small number of cases where the applications has been refused on substantive grounds.
[6] Provisional figures for 12 months ending 31 October.

Note:
Figures rounded to the nearest 5. n/a = not applicable.

Removals and voluntary departures [1,2] under port or enforcement procedures of asylum applicants, excluding dependants, 1995–99

Year	Number
1995	3,180
1996	4,840
1997	7,160
1998	6,900
1999[3]	7,740

[1] Does not include persons who may leave the United Kingdom without informing the Immigration and Nationality Directorate.
[2] Includes persons departing voluntarily after enforcement action had been initiated against them.
[3] Provisional figure for 12 months ending 31 October.
Note:
All figures are rounded to 10.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which organisation within his Department has the responsibility for arranging the deportation of asylum seekers whose applications are rejected; and what assessment has been made of the manner in which these responsibilities are undertaken. [102628]

Mrs. Roche: The Immigration Service is responsible for arranging for the removal from the United Kingdom of asylum seekers whose applications are refused. This includes those who are removed following deportation action. The Immigration Service is on target to meet the target of 8,000 removals in the current financial year. Targets for future years were set out in the annex to the White Paper "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum" which was published in July 1998. These targets are currently being reviewed.

The review of immigration procedures which preceded the White Paper's proposals identified a number of changes which we considered necessary to improve the enforcement of the immigration control. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 enables a number of these to be given effect. The performance of the Immigration Service is kept under constant review in order to encourage the adoption of best practice, ensure that priorities are dealt with and identify options for improving performance.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what records are kept of those persons who apply for political asylum and have their cases rejected; and how many such persons remain in the United Kingdom. [102627]

Mrs. Roche: Records are kept on all persons applying for asylum. These case files identify the initial decision, the outcome of any appeal, port or enforcement action taken subsequently and the removal of the person from the country. However, we do not have data available on how many asylum applicants have voluntarily left the country without the knowledge of the Home Office. Therefore, it is not possible to make a reliable estimate of the number of failed asylum seekers remaining in the country.

Anti-drugs Strategy

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the research projects being undertaken as part of the Government's anti-drugs strategy announced following the Comprehensive Spending Review. [102661]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The programme of research, for which £6 million has been allocated over three years, is designed to improve research and information gathering in support of the Government's 10 year strategy for tracking drug misuse. At present, the programme includes the following projects:

NEW-ADAM (New England and Wales Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring)—Voluntary drug testing and interviewing of arrestees in 16 custody suites across England and Wales (in progress);

Drug use questionnaire survey of school pupils in England (in progress);

Strategic review of regional drug misuse databases for treatment in England and Wales (in progress);

Survey of drug availability based on the perceptions of local experts (in progress);

Estimating the current capacity and future demands for drug treatment (complete); and

A supply-side programme of research to develop a model of the United Kingdom drugs market (in progress).

Prisons (Drug-free Units)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the drug-free units in prisons in England and Wales; and how many inmates are held in each of these units. [102403]

Mr. Boateng: The table shows the prisons with a designated voluntary testing unit or discrete area in prisons in England and Wales, and the number of places within each unit.

Total number of drug-free units in prisons in England and Wales and the number of prisoners held in each of these units

Establishment	Number of places
Aldington	20
Altcourse	140
Bedford	28
Belmarsh	55
Blundeston	120
Bristol	115
Brockhill	20
Buckley Hall	66
Bullingdon	83
Channings Wood	149
Dartmoor	30
Doncaster	180
Down View	343
Drake Hall	19
Elmley	68
Everthorpe	134
Featherstone	116
Frankland	240
Full Sutton	116
Haverigg	112
High Down	55
High Point	32
Hindley	70
Holme House	129
Hull	106
Lancaster	16
Leicester	30
Lewes	[1]—
Lindholme	169
Liverpool	268
Long Lartin	72
Maidstone	68
Manchester	416
Mount	260
New Hall	67

Total number of drug-free units in prisons in England and Wales and the number of prisoners held in each of these units

Establishment	*Number of places*
North Sea Camp	31
Northallerton	32
Norwich	143
Parc	180
Parkhurst	224
Pentonville	110
Portland	72
Ranby	72
Reading	20
Risley	77
Send	60
Shrewsbury	140
Standford	40
Stocken	160
Styal	57
Sudbury	120
Swaleside	72
Swinfen Hall	60
Verne	168
Wandsworth	68
Wayland	149
Wealstun	60
Weare	50
Wellingborough	180
Whitemoor	126
Winchester	24
Wolds	125
Woodhill	[1]—
Total (63)	6,632

[1] Number of prisoners held not available

Prisons (Girl Inmates)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many girls aged 15 to 18 years, held in adult prisons, share *(a)* facilities and *(b)* accommodation with adults. [102235]

Mr. Boateng: At the end of October there was a total of 102 young women under the age of 18 in Prison Service custody, of whom 81 were sentenced. The remaining 21 were 17-year-olds remanded awaiting trial or sentence. All remanded young women aged 15 and 16 are held in local authority care.

In the past, female young offenders and adult women were co-located, however, following the Flood judgment of August 1997, all female offenders under 21 years of age are held in designated young offender accommodation.

On 8 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 28–29W, my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary, announced that from the introduction of the Detention and Training order in April 2000, sentenced 15 and 16-year-old girls will be placed in local authority care, not in prison. In the longer term, as places become available, sentenced young women aged 17 will also be placed outside Prison Service custody.

The Prison Service is working closely with governors to ensure that female young offenders are kept in appropriate physically discrete accommodation and to develop specific regime provision for young women.

Police Officers (Ranks)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for each of *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1985, *(c)* 1990, *(d)* 1995 and *(e)* the latest year for which figures are available, if he will list the total number of officers who held the rank of (i) Inspector or Chief Inspector, (ii) Superintendent or Chief Superintendent and (iii) Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable, Assistant Chief Constable or equivalent rank for each police force in England and Wales. [R] [102401]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information in the form requested is readily available only for the years 1995 and 1999. This information is set out in the tables.

I will write to the right hon. Member with information for the earlier years, as soon as it is available.

Police Service in England and Wales—Strength[1] *for 31 March 1995*

Police force	*(i) Inspector or Chief Inspector*	*(ii) Superintendent or Chief Superintendent*	*(iii) Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable and Assistant Chief Constable*
Avon and Somerset	207	36	5
Bedfordshire	75	16	3
Cambridgeshire	81	14	3
Cheshire	129	21	4
City of London	70	9	2
Cleveland	106	14	2
Cumbria	89	16	3
Derbyshire	129	21	4
Devon and Cornwall	185	37	4
Dorset	97	20	3
Durham	96	20	3
Essex	180	31	5
Gloucestershire	78	16	3
Greater Manchester	510	83	7
Hampshire	197	45	5
Hertfordshire	121	23	3
Humberside	140	24	4
Kent	236	32	5
Lancashire	232	38	5
Leicestershire	129	20	4
Lincolnshire	87	15	3
Merseyside	316	67	5
Metropolitan police	1,698	212	43
Norfolk	86	17	3
Northamptonshire	77	12	3
Northumbria	230	43	5
North Yorkshire	86	16	3
Nottinghamshire	151	30	4
South Yorkshire	203	43	5
Staffordshire	155	31	4
Suffolk	83	18	3
Surrey	119	22	4
Sussex	202	29	5
Thames Valley	253	49	5
Warwickshire	73	10	3
West Mercia	165	26	4
West Midlands	463	89	7
West Yorkshire	355	46	6
Wiltshire	90	15	2
Dyfed-Powys	63	14	3
Gwent	56	14	2
North Wales	98	23	3
South Wales	205	37	4
Total all forces	8,401	1,414	206

[1] Full-time equivalents

Police strength in England and Wales—Strength [1] for ordinary duty as at 31 March 1999

Police force	(i) Inspector or Chief Inspector	(ii) Superintendent or Chief Superintendent	(iii) Chief Constable or Assistant Chief Constable
Avon and Somerset	191	23	4
Bedfordshire	64	13	3
Cambridgeshire	75	15	3
Cheshire	132	20	4
City of London	57	8	3
Cleveland	67	24	3
Cumbria	68	10	3
Derbyshire	119	24	4
Devon and Cornwall	181	26	5
Dorset	85	16	2
Durham	101	18	3
Dyfed Powys	61	16	3
Essex	179	28	4
Gloucestershire	70	10	3
Greater Manchester	432	78	7
Gwent	75	15	2
Hampshire	202	36	4
Hertfordshire	116	20	4
Humberside	134	19	3
Kent	190	27	4
Lancashire	209	33	4
Leicestershire	117	17	4
Lincolnshire	82	14	3
Merseyside	231	48	5
Metropolitan police	1,507	210	40
Norfolk	99	16	3
Northamptonshire	66	12	3
Northumbria	243	37	5
North Wales	97	16	3
North Yorkshire	75	13	3
Nottinghamshire	135	20	4
South Wales	200	27	5
South Yorkshire	211	35	5
Staffordshire	147	22	4
Suffolk	69	14	3
Surrey	97	17	4
Sussex	190	25	5
Thames Valley	223	48	4
Warwickshire	58	11	3
West Mercia	135	19	4
West Midlands	356	58	6
West Yorkshire	320	42	6
Wiltshire	76	13	3
Total all forces	7,540	1,213	200

[1] Full-time equivalents

CS Spray

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have been disciplined for the inappropriate use of CS spray in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [102355]

Mr. Charles Clarke: For the period 1 April to 9 December 1999, 46 cases relating to the use of CS spray were investigated under the supervision of the Police Complaints Authority, of which one complaint led to charges being brought against an officer and one other led to disciplinary advice being given.

138 further unsupervised cases were referred to the Authority's discipline section during this period. It is not possible at present to say how many of these complaints have been substantiated.

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents occurred in each of the last five years, broken down by police force area in England and Wales, where shots were discharged by persons engaged in criminal activity. [102165]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The first table shows for each year 1994 to 1998, the number of firearms (including air weapons) discharged in notifiable offences recorded by the police in each police force area in England and Wales. Information on air weapons discharged during the years 1995 to 1997 is not available centrally.

The second table gives similar information for 1994 and 1998 for all firearms, excluding air weapons.

Numbers of firearms discharged (including air weapons) in notifiable offences recorded by the police, England and Wales 1994 and 1998[1]

Police force	1994	1998
Avon and Somerset	154	186
Bedfordshire	84	107
Cambridgeshire	102	113
Cheshire	61	65
Cleveland	154	191
Cumbria	51	33
Derbyshire	230	270
Devon and Cornwall	136	91
Dorset	30	35
Durham	94	50
Essex	239	279
Gloucestershire	61	79
Greater Manchester	322	558
Hampshire	176	79
Hertfordshire	16	36
Humberside	508	460
Kent	409	203
Lancashire	94	132
Leicestershire	71	71
Lincolnshire	86	75
London, City of	—	—
Merseyside	384	586
Metropolitan Police	569	1,305
Norfolk	54	26
Northamptonshire	126	139
Northumbria	321	312
North Yorkshire	101	66
Nottinghamshire	202	538
South Yorkshire	383	322
Staffordshire	210	116
Suffolk	60	12
Surrey	49	25
Sussex	109	206
Thames Valley	236	346
Warwickshire	77	44
West Mercia	110	78
West Midlands	373	531
West Yorkshire	810	896
Wiltshire	11	66
Dyfed Powys	22	39
Gwent	35	163
North Wales	67	77
South Wales	255	243
Total	7,642	9,249

[1] Number of air weapons discharged for the years 1995–97 are not available centrally

Numbers of firearms discharged (excluding air weapons) in notifiable offences recorded by the police, England and Wales 1994–98

Police force	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Avon and Somerset	17	16	10	8	12
Bedfordshire	15	12	9	6	7
Cambridgeshire	5	7	5	1	3
Cheshire	7	6	4	1	5
Cleveland	14	5	9	9	4
Cumbria	3	9	2	2	—
Derbyshire	15	11	9	17	8
Devon and Cornwall	12	4	7	4	34
Dorset	2	2	6	3	4
Durham	1	4	10	5	5
Essex	23	25	14	15	10
Gloucestershire	4	10	7	7	5
Greater Manchester	59	58	55	77	96
Hampshire	17	6	9	5	11
Hertfordshire	5	15	19	10	9
Humberside	5	4	13	11	4
Kent	43	18	13	19	16
Lancashire	8	19	6	15	7
Leicestershire	15	8	12	20	16
Lincolnshire	6	6	2	1	3
London, City of	—	—	—	—	—
Merseyside	17	44	60	18	27
Metropolitan Police	190	157	332	412	463
Norfolk	5	8	2	4	4
Northamptonshire	7	9	11	8	12
Northumbria	39	20	28	9	10
North Yorkshire	4	2	—	5	1
Nottinghamshire	13	15	24	33	42
South Yorkshire	52	30	23	22	22
Staffordshire	21	11	5	2	5
Suffolk	6	3	—	2	—
Surrey	5	2	3	4	1
Sussex	18	13	11	20	25
Thames Valley	19	30	38	23	13
Warwickshire	8	2	2	—	3
West Mercia	11	3	13	7	12
West Midlands	57	132	153	73	96
West Yorkshire	27	34	35	16	16
Wiltshire	—	1	3	4	2
Dyfed Powys	9	4	5	4	2
Gwent	5	6	4	7	2
North Wales	4	6	10	2	8
South Wales	10	5	9	5	5
Total	803	782	992	916	1,030

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last five years and the current year to date how many illegally held *(a)* shotguns, *(b)* .22 rifles, *(c)* rifles of greater calibre than .22, *(d)* handguns and *(e)* other firearms were seized by the police in each police force area in England and Wales. [102162]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many homicides were committed using *(a)* shotguns, *(b)* rifles, *(c)* handguns and *(d)* other firearms, in each police force area in England and Wales in each of the last five years and the current year; and how many homicides were committed by the use of a legally held firearm used by the owner, shown by the type of weapon used. [102166]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Tables that have been placed in the Library give the requested information, including the legal status of the firearm where this was known.

All the data for 1998, and the legally held data for 1995 to 1998 is provisional.

No information is yet available for 1999.

Prisoners (Ethnic Breakdown)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the ethnic breakdown of *(a)* prisoners of British nationality and *(b)* all prisoners in each prison in England and Wales. [102171]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the table.

Population in prisons in England and Wales by nationality, ethnicity and establishment, 31 October 1999[1]

	White			*Black*			*South Asian*		
Prison	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*
Acklington	686	5	—	4	1	—	7	5	—
Albany	381	19	—	12	7	—	4	3	—
Altcourse	812	10	1	14	3	—	—	—	—
Ashwell	380	7	—	54	4	—	22	3	—
Askham Grange	93	—	—	22	3	—	—	4	—
Aylesbury	199	7	—	102	14	—	12	4	—
Bedford	282	15	1	31	11	—	24	12	—
Belmarsh	480	39	—	133	44	—	8	3	—
Birmingham	751	23	—	176	20	—	18	11	—
Blakenhurst	664	21	2	71	16	1	19	17	—
Blantyre House	100	2	—	6	4	—	1	2	—
Blundeston	211	12	—	67	29	—	7	1	—
Brinsford	371	4	1	80	7	—	27	1	—
Bristol	490	10	—	54	6	—	1	1	—
Brixton	347	65	—	181	102	—	6	14	—
Brockhill	121	2	1	18	4	—	4	2	—
Buckley Hall	314	7	—	37	4	—	12	1	—

Population in prisons in England and Wales by nationality, ethnicity and establishment, 31 October 1999[1]

	White			Black			South Asian		
Prison	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*
Bullingdon	690	27	—	80	16	—	21	7	—
Bullwood Hall	92	6	—	15	13	—	1	—	—
Camp Hill	332	24	—	69	25	—	3	2	—
Canterbury	215	51	—	3	12	—	—	3	—
Cardiff	620	4	—	43	2	—	3	1	—
Castington	292	1	—	9	1	—	2	1	—
Channings Wood	543	8	—	11	4	—	3	2	—
Chelmsford	386	17	—	25	4	—	2	1	—
Coldingly	143	6	—	71	38	—	2	3	—
Cookham Wood	70	9	—	17	32	—	1	—	—
Dartmoor	561	9	—	31	8	—	2	3	—
Deerbolt	411	1	—	8	—	—	—	—	—
Doncaster	942	6	2	80	3	—	7	—	—
Dorchester	233	1	—	4	—	—	—	—	—
Dover	199	6	—	59	11	—	5	1	—
Downview	192	9	—	89	16	—	5	3	—
Drake Hall	201	7	—	16	12	—	2	1	—
Durham	859	6	—	8	7	—	—	2	—
East Sutton Park	56	5	—	13	5	—	—	3	—
Eastwood Park	262	12	—	12	14	—	—	—	—
Elmley	699	89	—	63	23	—	7	6	—
Erlestoke	254	7	—	24	7	—	—	—	—
Everthorpe	426	6	—	15	1	—	7	—	—
Exeter	463	6	—	6	—	—	—	—	—
Featherstone	444	7	—	80	3	—	30	6	—
Feltham	366	24	—	263	78	—	38	9	—
Ford	289	12	—	26	6	—	10	8	—
Foston Hall	112	8	—	20	24	—	—	—	—
Frankland	451	13	—	30	8	—	8	6	—
Full Sutton	455	19	—	43	15	—	13	7	—
Garth	504	15	—	63	10	—	22	9	—
Gartree	298	9	—	25	3	—	6	9	—
Glen Parva	724	3	—	74	1	—	29	2	—
Gloucester	283	4	—	21	2	—	2	—	—
Grendon	368	12	—	48	9	—	18	3	—
Guys Marsh	466	5	—	25	2	—	4	4	—
Haslar	—	32	—	—	41	—	—	43	2
Hatfield	92	1	—	2	—	—	1	—	—
Haverigg	379	—	—	7	1	—	3	—	—
Hewell Grange	143	3	—	10	2	—	16	5	—
Highdown	456	39	—	103	63	—	8	8	—
Highpoint	488	49	—	101	75	—	8	10	—
Hindley	415	1	1	42	—	—	19	4	—
Hollesley Bay	203	4	—	87	13	—	6	1	—
Holloway	287	37	—	64	70	—	—	1	—
Holme House	923	3	—	17	2	—	3	3	—
Hull	485	4	—	9	—	—	3	—	—
Huntercombe	190	8	—	79	17	—	13	3	—
Kingston	159	4	—	8	4	—	—	2	—
Kirkham	430	2	—	7	4	—	16	2	—
Kirklevington	162	1	—	9	1	—	5	—	—
Lancaster	184	—	—	5	1	—	4	—	—
Lancaster Farms	465	5	—	15	—	—	10	1	—
Latchmere House	115	3	—	34	7	—	7	7	—
Leeds	1,064	9	1	64	7	—	65	21	—
Leicester	298	2	—	25	2	—	11	17	—
Lewes	383	14	—	33	9	—	3	1	—
Leyhill	356	6	—	16	2	—	5	3	—
Lincoln	459	6	—	13	3	—	3	—	—
Lindholme	547	4	1	32	—	—	14	3	—
Littlehey	515	21	—	45	12	—	13	11	—
Liverpool	1,359	11	—	54	9	—	9	4	—
Long Lartin	280	19	—	61	17	—	9	6	—
Low Newton	143	—	—	4	—	—	1	—	—
Lowdham Grange	350	30	—	84	18	—	8	5	—
Maidstone	359	28	—	79	39	—	2	10	—
Manchester	977	22	—	87	17	—	19	11	—
Moorland	652	2	—	60	—	—	23	2	—
Morton Hall	175	3	—	5	—	—	12	2	—
Mount	287	50	—	172	67	—	32	14	—

Population in prisons in England and Wales by nationality, ethnicity and establishment, 31 October 1999[1]

	White			Black			South Asian		
Prison	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*
New Hall	335	3	—	17	1	—	3	2	—
North Sea Camp	170	7	—	10	2	—	11	1	—
Northallerton	256	—	—	2	—	—	2	—	—
Norwich	621	16	—	35	3	—	3	2	—
Nottingham	352	6	—	55	5	—	6	7	—
Onley	440	6	1	75	15	—	31	2	—
Parc	771	11	1	17	2	—	1	—	—
Parkhurst	236	34	1	74	31	—	6	7	—
Pentonville	522	66	1	257	82	—	24	20	—
Portland	479	6	—	52	9	—	10	1	—
Preston	637	8	—	9	2	—	11	4	—
Ranby	656	6	—	41	3	—	28	4	—
Reading	202	6	—	15	2	—	2	—	—
Risley	709	14	—	43	6	—	8	3	—
Rochester	150	8	—	12	36	—	1	25	—
Send	57	11	—	37	44	—	1	1	—
Shepton Mallet	166	3	—	12	3	—	—	1	—
Shrewsbury	305	2	—	14	2	—	9	2	—
Stafford	516	12	—	60	4	—	13	5	—
Standford Hill	181	22	—	36	18	—	10	11	—
Stocken	451	10	—	69	7	—	22	6	—
Stoke Heath	540	2	—	64	1	—	9	2	—
Styal	392	7	—	20	20	—	2	1	—
Sudbury	377	10	—	49	6	—	17	16	—
Swaleside	340	82	—	120	56	—	12	11	—
Swansea	308	5	—	—	—	—	3	3	—
Swinfen Hall	205	2	—	52	2	—	14	1	—
Thorn Cross	230	1	—	14	1	—	11	2	—
Usk	287	5	—	2	—	—	1	—	—
Verne	266	83	—	11	133	—	3	10	—
Wakefield	480	11	—	48	3	—	6	3	—
Wandsworth	738	80	—	239	83	—	11	9	—
Wayland	445	19	—	95	26	—	13	3	—
Wealstun	509	9	—	31	1	—	41	11	—
Weare	280	12	—	46	14	—	3	3	—
Wellingborough	344	18	—	54	11	—	20	7	—
Werrington	91	1	—	8	—	—	2	—	—
Wetherby	318	1	1	9	—	—	8	1	—
Whatton	255	5	—	3	1	—	5	1	—
Whitemoor	233	42	—	55	13	—	4	7	—
Winchester	503	19	—	28	29	—	5	4	—
Wolds	371	11	—	9	3	—	3	3	—
Woodhill	571	26	—	60	9	—	15	5	—
Wormwood Scrubs	349	55	—	102	75	—	27	15	—
Wymott	725	11	—	30	2	—	14	4	—
All	51,732	1,899	16	6,075	1,963	1	1,227	612	2

[1] Provisional figures

Population in prisons in England and Wales by nationality, ethnicity and establishment, 31 October 1999[1]

	Chinese & Other			Not recorded			Total			
Prison	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*All*
Acklington	3	2	—	—	—	—	700	13	—	713
Albany	1	4	—	1	—	—	399	33	—	432
Altcourse	1	1	—	—	—	—	827	14	1	842
Ashwell	13	1	—	1	—	—	470	15	—	485
Askham Grange	2	—	—	—	—	—	117	7	—	124
Aylesbury	4	5	—	1	—	—	318	30	—	348
Bedford	4	1	—	—	—	—	341	39	1	381
Belmarsh	21	49	—	—	—	—	642	135	—	777
Birmingham	84	10	—	—	—	—	1,029	64	—	1,093
Blakenhurst	12	6	—	—	—	—	766	60	3	829
Blantyre House	3	1	1	—	—	—	110	9	1	120
Blundeston	10	12	—	1	—	—	296	54	—	350
Brinsford	18	1	—	—	—	—	496	13	1	510
Bristol	2	2	—	—	—	—	547	19	—	566
Brixton	20	57	—	—	—	—	554	238	—	792
Brockhill	5	1	—	—	—	—	148	9	1	158

Population in prisons in England and Wales by nationality, ethnicity and establishment, 31 October 1999[1]

	Chinese & Other			Not recorded			Total			
Prison	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*All*
Buckley Hall	7	3	—	—	—	—	370	15	—	385
Bullingdon	8	7	—	—	—	—	799	57	—	856
Bullwood Hall	3	3	—	—	—	—	111	22	—	133
Camp Hill	11	9	—	—	—	—	415	60	—	475
Canterbury	—	14	—	—	—	—	218	80	—	298
Cardiff	6	—	—	—	—	—	672	7	—	679
Castington	3	—	—	—	—	—	306	3	—	309
Channings Wood	3	1	—	—	—	—	560	15	—	575
Chelmsford	8	8	—	—	—	—	421	30	—	451
Coldingly	5	8	—	—	—	—	221	55	—	276
Cookham Wood	6	13	—	—	—	—	94	54	—	148
Dartmoor	3	2	—	—	—	—	597	22	—	619
Deerbolt	11	1	—	—	—	—	430	2	—	432
Doncaster	66	1	—	—	—	—	1,095	10	2	1,107
Dorchester	1	3	—	—	—	—	238	4	—	242
Dover	7	7	—	—	—	—	270	25	—	295
Downview	8	14	—	—	4	—	294	46	—	340
Drake Hall	2	2	—	—	—	—	221	22	—	243
Durham	2	10	—	—	—	—	869	25	—	894
East Sutton Park	5	2	—	—	—	—	74	15	—	89
Eastwood Park	2	1	—	—	—	—	276	27	—	303
Elmley	7	15	—	—	1	—	776	134	—	910
Erlestoke	5	3	—	—	—	—	283	17	—	300
Everthorpe	8	—	—	—	—	—	456	7	—	403
Exeter	3	2	—	—	—	—	472	8	—	480
Featherstone	18	3	—	—	—	—	572	19	—	591
Feltham	15	26	—	—	—	—	682	137	—	819
Ford	18	15	—	1	—	—	344	41	—	385
Foston Hall	4	1	—	1	—	—	137	33	—	170
Frankland	4	12	—	—	—	—	493	39	—	532
Full Sutton	5	14	—	—	—	—	516	55	—	571
Garth	9	4	—	1	—	—	599	38	—	637
Gartree	3	3	—	—	—	—	332	24	—	356
Glen Parva	8	—	—	—	—	—	835	6	—	841
Gloucester	1	2	—	—	—	—	307	8	—	315
Grendon	7	3	—	—	—	—	441	27	—	468
Guys Marsh	6	4	—	—	—	—	501	15	—	516
Haslar	—	37	—	—	—	—	—	153	2	155
Hatfield	—	—	—	—	—	—	95	1	—	96
Haverigg	4	—	—	—	—	—	393	1	—	394
Hewell Grange	8	1	—	—	—	—	177	11	—	188
Highdown	7	14	—	1	—	—	575	124	—	699
Highpoint	20	15	—	—	—	—	617	149	—	766
Hindley	2	1	—	—	—	—	478	6	1	485
Hollesley Bay	5	5	—	—	—	—	301	23	—	324
Holloway	13	24	—	—	—	—	364	132	—	496
Holme House	12	3	—	—	—	—	955	11	—	966
Hull	—	1	—	—	—	—	497	5	—	502
Huntercombe	6	6	—	—	—	—	288	34	—	322
Kingston	2	2	—	—	—	—	169	12	—	181
Kirkham	9	3	—	1	—	—	463	11	—	474
Kirklevington	—	1	—	—	—	—	176	3	—	179
Lancaster	4	—	—	—	—	—	197	1	—	198
Lancaster Farms	11	—	—	—	—	—	501	6	—	507
Latchmere House	6	5	—	1	—	—	163	22	—	185
Leeds	14	1	—	—	—	—	1,207	38	—	1,246
Leicester	7	—	—	—	—	—	341	21	—	362
Lewes	3	5	—	—	—	—	422	29	—	451
Leyhill	3	1	—	—	—	—	380	12	—	392
Lincoln	3	3	—	—	—	—	478	12	—	490
Lindholme	10	1	—	—	—	—	603	8	1	612
Littlehey	10	10	—	—	—	—	583	54	—	637
Liverpool	11	1	—	—	—	—	1,433	25	—	1,458
Long Lartin	8	17	—	3	—	—	361	59	—	420
Low Newton	2	—	—	—	—	—	150	—	—	150
Lowdham Grange	6	14	—	1	—	—	449	67	—	516
Maidstone	7	24	—	1	—	—	448	101	—	549
Manchester	20	8	—	—	—	—	1,103	58	—	1,161
Moorland	24	2	—	—	—	—	759	6	—	765
Morton Hall	—	—	—	1	—	—	193	5	—	198

Population in prisons in England and Wales by nationality, ethnicity and establishment, 31 October 1999[1]

	Chinese & Other			Not recorded			Total			
Prison	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*British nationals*	*Foreign nationals*	*Not known*	*All*
Mount	13	23	—	—	—	—	504	154	—	638
New Hall	5	1	—	—	—	—	360	7	—	367
North Sea Camp	5	—	—	—	—	—	196	10	—	206
Northallerton	6	1	—	—	—	—	266	1	—	267
Norwich	4	6	—	—	—	—	663	27	—	690
Nottingham	3	—	—	—	—	—	416	18	—	434
Onley	16	2	—	1	—	—	563	25	1	589
Parc	6	2	—	1	—	—	796	15	1	812
Parkhurst	10	53	—	1	—	—	327	125	1	453
Pentonville	53	74	—	1	—	—	857	242	1	1,100
Portland	7	1	—	—	—	—	548	17	—	565
Preston	6	1	—	1	—	—	664	15	—	679
Ranby	7	2	—	—	—	—	732	15	—	747
Reading	2	—	—	—	—	—	221	8	—	229
Risley	6	4	—	—	—	—	766	27	—	763
Rochester	—	136	—	—	—	—	163	205	—	368
Send	7	7	—	1	—	—	103	63	—	166
Shepton Mallet	3	2	—	—	—	—	181	9	—	190
Shrewsbury	4	—	—	—	—	—	332	6	—	338
Stafford	14	—	—	—	—	—	603	21	—	624
Standford Hill	4	12	—	—	—	1	231	63	1	295
Stocken	6	2	—	—	—	—	548	25	—	573
Stoke Heath	12	—	—	—	—	—	625	5	—	630
Styal	4	6	—	1	—	—	419	34	—	453
Sudbury	18	6	—	—	—	—	461	38	—	499
Swaleside	16	49	—	—	—	—	488	198	—	686
Swansea	1	3	—	—	—	—	312	11	—	323
Swinfen Hall	5	—	—	—	—	—	276	5	—	281
Thorn Cross	10	—	—	—	—	—	265	4	—	269
Usk	2	1	—	—	—	—	292	6	—	298
Verne	4	52	—	—	—	—	284	278	—	562
Wakefield	11	1	—	—	—	—	545	18	—	563
Wandsworth	43	91	—	—	1	—	1,031	264	—	1,295
Wayland	12	10	—	—	—	—	565	58	—	623
Wealstun	10	2	—	—	—	—	591	23	—	614
Weare	4	2	—	—	—	—	333	31	—	364
Wellingborough	11	8	—	—	—	—	429	44	—	473
Werrington	—	—	—	—	—	—	101	1	—	102
Wetherby	6	—	—	—	—	—	341	2	1	344
Whatton	1	—	—	—	—	—	264	7	—	271
Whitemoor	4	22	—	—	—	—	296	84	—	380
Winchester	6	7	—	—	—	—	542	59	—	601
Wolds	—	—	—	—	—	—	383	17	—	400
Woodhill	6	7	—	2	—	—	654	47	—	701
Wormwood Scrubs	26	34	—	1	—	—	505	179	—	684
Wymott	8	—	—	—	—	—	777	17	—	794
	1,135	1,204	1	26	6	1	60,195	5,684	21	65,900

[1] Provisional figures

Tariffs

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to seek an amendment of the law to allow appeals against tariff lengths by victims or their next of kin. [102182]

Mr. Boateng: We have no such plans at present. But we are considering other measures to bring victims of crime closer to the heart of the criminal justice system. They include the possibility of allowing victims, or their next of kin, to make statements about the effect a crime has had on them. Such statements would travel with the case papers and be considered at every stage of proceedings.

The Probation Service now routinely makes contact with the victims or their immediate family when those responsible for a serious sexual or violent offence are sentenced to four years or more imprisonment.

Within two months of sentence, the Probation Service contacts the victim, or their immediate family, to ask if they would like to be informed in due course about any plans for the eventual release of the prisoner. If so, the Probation Service explains the custodial process and, in particular, how any decision to release such an offender will be made. Victims or their families are also asked whether they have any particular concerns about proposals for a prisoner's temporary or final release. These views will not affect whether a prisoner is released, but they can affect the conditions attached to the release.

Police Officer Numbers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of police officers in each police authority in Wales for 1999. [102617]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police numbers is collected twice a year (March and September). The figures for September 1999 are not yet available. Information for 31 March 1999 is set out in the table.

Welsh police forces	*Police numbers as at 31 March 1999*
Dyfed Powys	1,026
Gwent	1,247
North Wales	1,391
South Wales	2,981

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Disability Rights

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to make regulations under the Disability Rights Commission Act 1999. [102848]

Ms Hodge: The Government have today launched a public consultation on draft Regulations. The Regulations would provide for a statutory time limit for the completion of formal investigations undertaken by the Disability Rights Commission. They would also specify the time in which the DRC must consider, and reach a decision on, the adequacy of an action plan proposed to it by an organisation in receipt of a non-discrimination notice.

A consultation pack is being sent to 150 organisations in England, Scotland and Wales. The pack will also be available on the DfEE Internet site and in a number of alternative formats.

The consultation ends on 18 February 2000.

Performance Targets

Mrs. Butler: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress the Employment Service has made towards its Annual Performance Agreement targets over the period April to September. [102902]

Ms Jowell: I am pleased to announce that for the period from April to September 1999 the Employment Service has exceeded planned performance levels for seven of the eight Annual Performance Agreement targets. I set out in the following table the performance of the Agency for Quarters one and two and cumulative performance to September.

As part of our commitment to modern and accessible public services, I have asked the Chief Executive of the Agency to publish the Employment Service's quarterly results on the Employment Service Internet website which can be found at www.employmentservice.gov.uk. The results will normally be made available within four weeks of the end of the statistical period.

Employment service annual performance agreement targets 1999–2000	*April-June 1999*	*July-September 1999*	*Cumulative*	*End year target*
Total placings of unemployed jobseekers	326,714	374,469	701,183	1,250,000
Variance against profiled target (%)	0.3	9.1	4.8	—
Placings of Jobseeker Allowance (JSA) Claimants unemployed for 6 months or more	51,108	64,576	115,684	190,000
Variance against profiled target (%)	4.6	23.5	14.3	—
Placings of JSA Claimants unemployed for two years or more	10,106	13,396	23,502	38,000
Variance against profiled target (%)	4.6	26.2	15.9	—
Placings of Jobseekers on the New Deal for 18–24 year olds[1]	25,541	31,813	57,354	100,000
Variance against profiled target (%)	4.1	15.7	10.3	—
New Deal for Lone Parent Placings[1]	4,002	5,247	9,249	15,000
Variance against profiled target (%)	5.5	47.8	25.9	—
Placings of Unemployed People with Disabilities	24,719	26,449	51,168	85,000
Variance against profiled target (%)	7.0	15.2	11.1	—
To ensure the correct application of JSA processes by ES staff[2] (%)	81	83	82	96
Customer Service for jobseekers (%)	86.3	88	87.2	87

[1] Based on Employment Service (ES) performance information, which records New Deal for Young People and New Deal for Lone Parents job placings achieved directly by, or in partnership with the ES. This will vary from Government Statistical Services (GSS) statistics for New Deal which record the total number of New Deal participants who have found work through the New Deal.
[2] The ES aim to achieve 90 per cent., 92 per cent. and 94 per cent. in the first three Quarters of the year.

Higher Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the final costs of higher education delivery was accounted for by staffing costs in the most recent year for which information is available. [102462]

Mr. Wicks: The latest figures, covering the 1997–98, academic year, show that staffing costs in UK higher education institutions represented 57 per cent. of total institutional expenditure.

Standards and Effectiveness Unit

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the employment status of the Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit at the Department for Education and Employment. [102195]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* I am replying on behalf of my right hon. Friend. The Secretary of State appointed Professor Michael Barber as his Schools Standards and Effectiveness Adviser. He is employed on Special Adviser terms.

Head Teachers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications have been received from head teachers for early retirement under the Government's proposals; and if he will list the criteria under which these applications will be determined. [102613]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Just under 300 applications have been received from Local Education Authorities for those Headteachers who they believe meet the criteria set down in the Standards Fund circular. The scheme's criteria are:

aged 55–59 at proposed date of retirement;

has served continuously as a Headteacher in one or more posts for at least five years and has provided satisfactory service;

unlikely to adapt well to carrying forward the major changes envisaged in improving education.

LEAs were asked to provide Ofsted reports and other evidence to confirm that the application met the criteria.

"The Rights of Teachers"

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish the responses to the consultation paper, "The General Teaching Council for England: The Rights of Teachers" and the Government's conclusions. [102772]

Jacqui Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State expects to publish the results of the consultation on the register of teachers and the Government's response by the end of January 2000.

Higher Education Students

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for students enrolling in higher education institutions in England in each year since 1990, the number of *(a)* full-time, *(b)* part-time, *(c)* mature, *(d)* male *(e)* female and *(f)* ethnic minority students; and what was the total enrolment. [101948]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The information is shown in the following table.

UK domiciled entrants to undergraduate courses in England

Year of entry [1]	*Total entrants*	*Full-time*	*Part-time*	*Of which, those who were: Mature* [2]	*Male*	*Female*
1990	329,183	192,508	136,675	161,143	178,427	150,756
1991	377,744	232,406	145,338	189,775	202,654	175,090
1992	415,568	271,515	144,053	213,990	218,156	197,412
1993	437,206	290,731	146,493	230,357	227,326	209,880
1994	460,814	285,354	175,460	253,862	229,215	231,599
1995	477,556	286,515	191,041	270,140	227,155	250,401
1996	476,245	286,128	190,117	267,049	221,976	254,269
1997	484,070	297,190	186,880	260,123	221,159	262,911
1998[3]	481,705	288,566	193,139	257,857	216,935	264,770

[1] Figures for 1994 and later years were collected on a different basis to those in earlier years.
[2] Aged 21 and over.
[3] Provisional.

Year of entry [1]	*Total undergraduate entrants with known ethnicity*	*Of which: from ethnic minorities* [2]
1990	277,748	39,336
1991	319,427	44,126
1992	342,121	43,677
1993	364,575	56,845
1994	380,376	51,432
1995	394,886	56,049
1996	415,763	61,262
1997	426,734	64,224
1998[3]	428,631	63,437

[1] Figures for 1994 and later years were collected on a different basis to those in earlier years.
[2] Covers the following ethnic groups: Black Caribbean, Black African, Black other, Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Asian Bangladeshi, Asian Chinese, Asian other, Other (non-white) ethnic origin.
[3] Provisional

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for the 1998–99 academic year, what (i) number and (ii) percentage of full-time students enrolled in higher education institutions in England were assessed as being required to pay *(a)* the full tuition fee, *(b)* no tuition fee and *(c)* some tuition fee. [101947]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The first data on Local Education Authority financial support for the student tuition fees introduced in 1998–99 will be available in April 2000 from returns collected retrospectively from Local Education Authorities in England and Wales.

These data will show the number of locally-domiciled students who, after income assessment, paid their own tuition fees in full; have had their fees paid (i) in full; and (ii) in part by their Local Education Authority.

Education Spending

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much each local authority in England and Wales spent on education in 1998–99 *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* as a percentage of the authority's total budget. [102313]

Ms Estelle Morris: Expenditure figures for each authority in England for 1998–99 are not yet available. I will write to the hon. Member when the figures he requests are available, and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library. Responsibility for education matters in Wales rests with the National Assembly for Wales.

Class Sizes (Essex)

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils in infant classes in Essex schools were in classes of 30 or over in September 1999; what percentage of infant pupils this represents; and what the change in the percentage was from September 1998. [101958]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information shows that, in September 1999, there were 4,972 pupils in infant classes of 31 or more taught by one teacher in the Essex local education authority area. This figure represents 13 per cent. of all pupils in infant classes taught by one teacher in that area. Since September 1998, the number of pupils in infant classes of 31 or more in Essex has fallen by 39 per cent.

Education Spending (Staffordshire)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the *(a)* education standard spending assessment and *(b)* outturn education spending for Staffordshire local education authority for (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99, per (1) primary pupil and (2) secondary pupil. [101959]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table sets out, for Staffordshire local education authority, per primary pupil and secondary pupil, the education standard spending assessment and outturn education spending for 1997–98. Figures for 1998–99 are not yet available. I will write to my hon. Friend when the figures he requests are available and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library.

£

	Per primary pupil	*Per secondary pupil*
Education SSA		
1997–98	1,935	2,533
1998–99	2,037	2,653
Net institutional expenditure		
1997–98	1,575	2,115

Note:
Net institutional outturn figures are derived from LEAs' returns of their spending to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on revenue outturn form RO1. The RO1 and SSA figures have a different coverage and are not directly comparable.

Standards Fund

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to allow *(a)* individual schools and *(b)* groups of schools within a local education authority to bid for resources from the Standards Fund where the LEA has declined to do so. [101909]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Standards Fund is paid under powers conferred upon the Secretary of State by the Education Act 1996. Section 484 of that Act enables the Secretary of State to pay education standards grants to local education authorities in respect of eligible expenditure incurred or to be incurred by them.

Infant Class Sizes (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many infant pupils were in classes of over 30 taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in Worcestershire in *(a)* September 1996 and *(b)* September 1997. [101503]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on infant class sizes in September has only been collected since 1998.

Between September 1998 and September 1999 the number of infants in Worcestershire in classes of 31 or more fell from 3,156 (18 per cent. of total) to 1,962 (or 11 per cent. of total).

Prior to local government re-organisation in April 1998 maintained primary schools in Worcestershire formed part of the local education authority of 'Hereford and Worcester'.

New Deal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many sustained unsubsidised jobs of 13 weeks or more employment have so far been found by participants on the New Deal for Lone Parents. [102105]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 9 December 1999]*: Latest figures to the end of September 1999 show that 23,000 lone parents have gained unsubsidised jobs through the New Deal for Lone Parents since the launch of the full national programme on 26 October 1998. The issue of sustained employment is being addressed as part of the quantitative evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents.

English Teaching

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to require local councils to provide specialist schools to teach English to children who are unable to speak it and to prepare them for admission to state schools. [102629]

Jacqui Smith: No. The Government do not favour the introduction of such schools which would deny the children attending them access to the full National Curriculum, which is their entitlement.

The Government are providing additional support to schools and local education authorities for children learning English as an additional language. For 2000–01, £162.5 million will be available from the Standards Fund.

Pupil Numbers

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the percentage of nursery classes in primary schools with *(a)* 31 or more pupils and *(b)* 36 or more pupils in (i) January 1993 and (ii) January 1994. [102519]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Percentage of nursery classes in maintained primary schools taught by one teacher by size: 1993–94—England

Position as at January	*Percentage of nursery classes of size 31 or more*	*of size 36 or more*
1994	19	13
1993	21	16

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the percentage of classes at Key Stage Two with 31 or more pupils in *(a)* January 1993, *(b)* January 1994 and *(c)* January 1995. [102521]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on the size of key stage two classes is available only from 1996 onwards.

The percentage of primary classes in England with 31 or more pupils taught by one teacher was as follows:

Position as at January

1995: 24.4 per cent.

1994: 23.2 per cent.

1993: 21.6 per cent.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the percentage of secondary school classes with *(a)* 31 or more pupils and *(b)* 36 or more pupils in January (i) 1990, (ii) 1991, (iii) 1992, (iv) 1993 and (v) 1994. [102520]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Percentage of classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools by size: 1990–1994
England

Position as at January	*Percentage of classes with 31 or more pupils*	*Percentage of classes with 36 or more pupils*
1994	5.3	0.1
1995	4.9	0.1
1996	4.5	0.1
1997	4.1	0.1
1998	4.1	0.1

School Funding

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 48W, what is the breakdown of funding by *(a)* LEA and *(b)* pupil, that comes through the (i) Standard Spending Assessment and (ii) Standards Fund for (1) 1997–98 and (2) 1998–99; and what are the projected figures for (x) 1999–2000 and (y) 2000–01. [101860]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* I will place tables in the Library that show the breakdown of funding by LEA and per pupil through the Standard Spending Assessment. SSA figures for 2000–01 are provisional. Standards Fund allocations by LEA are also given in the tables for the years 1997–98 to 1999–2000. Standards Fund allocations for 2000–01 will not be available until the new year. It is not possible to disaggregate Standards Fund allocations between different age groups. Standards Fund allocations are not made on a per pupil basis.

Skills Improvement

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he is taking to improve basic skill levels among the adult population, with particular reference to the Metropolitan Borough of Sefton. [102145]

Mr. Wicks: The Government announced the first steps of a national crusade to improve adult basic skills on 5 November in the light of the Moser Report, "A Fresh Start". Key measures include a national basic skills curriculum based on new standards, national testing, intensive training for basic skills teachers, an expansion of basic skills learning in the community and in the workplace, and improved screening and support for unemployed people. Further details of the Government's action to date are set out in the "Better Basic Skills" pamphlet available on the lifelong learning website—www.lifelonglearning.dfee.gov.uk. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment plans to announce the Government's full strategy to help adults with poor basic skills next year.

Government support to improve adult basic skills in Sefton currently includes funding through the DfEE's Standards Fund for Family Literacy and Numeracy, and support for community-based basic skills projects through the Adult and Community Learning Fund. Further details about adult basic skills initiatives in Sefton and the pamphlet referred to are being sent to my hon. Friend.

"Learning to Succeed"

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what response he has had to the consultation on post-16 learning, following the publication of the White Paper, "Learning to Succeed"; and if he will make a statement. [102745]

Mr. Blunkett: We have received over 1,000 responses to the consultation about "Learning to Succeed". These responses have shown overwhelming support for our proposals to establish a new system of post-16 learning which is coherent, accessible and responsive to the needs of individuals, companies and communities.

The White Paper sets out our plans for introducing a new Learning and Skills Council for England. I am today publishing a Prospectus which sets out in more detail the way the new Council will work. The new Council will have a budget of around £6 billion and be responsible for almost six million learners. It will establish a strong national framework to lead the drive to meeting national targets, with substantial local flexibility for the 47 local Councils which I announced on 29 October. The local LSCs will ensure that the needs of local communities, including employers and individuals, are met. They will have significant resources to deliver these responsibilities including allocation of the great majority of the LSC's funds. This will include responsibility for a range of local discretionary budgets which will amount to around 10–15 per cent. of the LSC's total budget.

The new Council will ensure that post-16 learning offers excellence with diversity, so that the highest possible standards of provision are consistently secured for the needs of individuals and businesses. In this way, the Learning and Skills Council will be at the centre of the Government's drive to raise skill levels, increase the employability of individuals, and secure the competitiveness of UK business.

In the consultation paper on school sixth form funding that was published with "Learning to Succeed" we invited views on whether local education authorities should be funded by the Learning and Skills Council for school sixth

form provision, or whether they should continue to be funded through the current local government finance system. In the light of the comments received, in particular from headteachers, we have decided that LEAs should in future receive their sixth form funds via the Learning and Skills Council, with schools continuing to receive the funds from their local education authority. For 16 to 19-year-olds, schools and colleges often deliver the same type of teaching, curriculum and qualifications. The LSC's involvement will ensure a coherent approach to post-16 provision, helping to support high national standards and greater local collaboration. There will be safeguards so that a school's sixth form budget will not reduce in real terms provided numbers are maintained. We do not expect to introduce this change in funding arrangements before 2002–03 and will be consulting LEAs, schools and others shortly on the timing, phasing and implementation of the change.

Schools with sixth forms will play a vital role in the drive to increase success for all our young people. We also want to encourage new forms of provision to meet the needs of young people and to ensure that patterns of provision best serve local needs. We therefore intend to lift the legal bar on the creation of LEA-maintained 16–19 institutions imposed by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Subject to the passage of legislation, LEAs and other promoters will all be able to propose the creation of LEA-maintained 16–19 institutions. The LSC will also be able to propose the establishment of new LSC-maintained sixth form colleges. In addition, FE colleges will continue to be able to set up their own bespoke sixth form provision where there is a demand for this locally. These arrangements will put in the hands of local communities options for raising standards and providing the choices and curriculum breadth young people need and want as we enter the next century.

Through the Learning and Skills Council and the complementary initiatives we are taking at other levels of education, we are determined to raise people's aspirations, improve standards and greatly extend opportunities for lifelong learning to all. The setting up of the Learning and Skills Council is also part of our wider efforts to prepare everyone in this country for their full participation in a knowledge-driven economy and modern, democratic society.

Copies of the Prospectus are available in the Vote Office. A full analysis of the responses to the consultation will be published in the new year. The proposals in the White Paper and the Prospectus remain subject to the passage of legislation which was announced in the Queen's Speech.

HEALTH

Drugs (Price Increases)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the level of increase in the price of drugs prescribed generically by the NHS in each of the last three years, indicating the 10 drugs which have shown the highest rate of increase and what that rate has been in each case. [100847]

Ms Stuart: The available information is set out in the tables:

Level of increase in price of drugs prescribed generically by the National Health Service in each of the last three years

	Price index	*Annual increase in prices*
1996	100	n/a
1997	100.3	0.3 per cent.
1998	96.8	−3.5 per cent.
1999	105.2	8.7 per cent.

Note:

The price index is based on those 90 drugs within the top 100 generic drugs by net ingredient cost in 1998 which were dispensed in each year between January 1996 and June 1999. Prices of individual drugs have been weighted using quantities dispensed in 1998. Data for 1999 is based on prescriptions dispensed in the first half of the year.

Top 10 generic drugs with greatest increase in unit reimbursement price between 1996 and 1997

Drug name	*Percentage change in unit price*
Warfarin Sod Tab 1mg	222.8
Warfarin Sod Tab 3mg	218.2
Frusemide Tab 40mg	34.8
Diclofenac Sod Tab E/C 50mg	31.7
Glibenclamide Tab 5mg	25.6
Bendrofluazide Tab 2.5mg	13.1
Thyroxine Sod Tab 25mcg	9.9
Co-Codamol Eff Tab 8mg/500mg	8.0
Cimetidine Tab 400mg	7.4
Dihydrocodeine Tart Tab 30mg	7.2

Top 10 generic drugs with greatest increase in unit reimbursement price between 1997 and 1998

Drug name	*Percentage change in unit price*
Erythromycin Tab E/C 250mg	34.4
Amoxycillin Cap 250mg	24.1
Hypromellose Eye Dps 0.3%	17.6
Oxytetracycline Tab 250mg	16.9
Co-Codamol Eff Tab 8mg/500mg	8.8
Ibuprofen Tab 400mg	8.5
Amoxycillin Oral Susp 250mg/5ml	6.3
Co-Amilofruse Tab 2.5mg/20mg	6.1
Hydroxocobalamin Inj 1mg/1ml Amp	6.0
Amoxycillin Oral Susp 125mg/5ml	5.2

Notes:

1. The top 10 generic drugs with the greatest increase in each table were selected from the top 100 generic drugs in terms of net ingredient cost in the review period.

2. The prescription information was obtained from the Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA) system and is based on a full analysis of all prescriptions dispensed in the community, i.e. by community pharmacists, and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors, and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered, in England.

3. The unit prices are averages calculated for each preparation from the net ingredient cost and the quantity in each period.

4. The net ingredient cost is the basic cost of a drug and does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.

Top 10 drugs (from top 100 generics in terms of net ingredient cost in 1998) with greatest per cent. increase in Drug Tariff price between January and December 1999

Preparation	*Per cent. change in unit price* [1]
Bendrofluazide tablets 2.5mg	988.2
Frusemide tablets 40mg	711.7
Ibuprofen tablets 400mg	315.4
Tamoxifen tablets 20mg	216.8
Cimetidine tablets 400mg	213.9
Thyroxine tablets 25mcg	175.2
Captopril tablets 12.5mg	171.3
Amoxycillin capsules 250mg	143.1
Warfarin tablets 3mg	127.1
Co-dydramol tablets 10/500	125.9

[1] January-December 1999

Note:
Prices have been taken from the printed Drug Tariff (except December 1999 from PPA spreadsheet) and are therefore on a different basis to those quoted for earlier years which have been derived from prescriptions already dispensed and processed.

HRT

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the cost to the NHS of charging a single prescription charge for HRT prescriptions which specify more than one hormone replacement. [98763]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* It is estimated that around £6 million in charge income would be lost if a single prescription charge was paid when more than one hormone in hormone replacement therapy was supplied by community pharmacists in England.

TREASURY

Pensions Annuities

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what statutory provisions govern the type of securities which underpin private pension annuities; and what plans he has to review those provisions. [102446]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Insurance Companies Act 1982 and associated regulations require insurance companies to maintain appropriate assets to match their liabilities. Companies base their decisions on asset allocation on advice from their appointed actuaries. In practice, this usually means that annuity liabilities are matched by high quality longer term and low-risk, near cash instruments, often gilt-edged securities.

Citizens Panel

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the questions submitted by his Department for inclusion in the next wave of questions for the Cabinet Office's Citizens Panel. [102322]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Questions to help judge the responsiveness of services to consumers are under consideration for the People's Panel. To ensure the representativeness of the survey, questions are not published in advance. However, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, will write to the hon. Member with the relevant questions once the fieldwork is complete. Questions are made public when the results are published and copies will be placed in the House of Commons Library at that point.

Departmental Expenditure (Windfall Tax)

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to change the overall 1999–2000 Departmental Expenditure Limit for expenditure financed by the Windfall Tax. [102903]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The overall Departmental Expenditure Limit for expenditure financed by the Windfall tax will be increased by £43,454,000 from £1,491,839,000 to £1,535,293,000. The increase is the effect of the take up of end year flexibility entitlements announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 393W, by the Department for Education and Employment (£38,654,000); the Prison Service (£173,000); the Department of Social Security (£3,378,000); the Scottish Executive (£460,000) and the National Assembly for Wales (£789,000).

The individual elements of the increase have already been announced but the impact on the overall limit has not. The increases will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

International Monetary Fund

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to publish a report on UK operations at the International Monetary Fund. [102986]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I am today publishing the first Annual Report to Parliament on UK operations at the IMF. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

Beer Duty

Mr. Todd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what analysis his Department has made of the potential impact on Government revenues of a reduction in the duty on beer. [102825]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The potential impact on Government revenues of a change in beer duty is shown in Table 6 of the Tax Ready Reckoner and Tax Reliefs, published by HM Treasury in November of this year.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102375]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Records are kept of meetings attended by Treasury Ministers as the occasions demand.

Professional Contractors Group

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will hold a further consultation with the Professional Contractors Group over the proposed change in the definition of employment status. [102764]

Dawn Primarolo: I met representatives of the Professional Contractors Group on 9 December. We have no plans to change the definition of employment status.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families will benefit from the working families tax credit by constituency. [102591]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of the Working Families' Tax Credit by constituency are not yet available.

Teenage Pregnancies

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many teenage pregnancies there were in each constituency in each of the past 10 years. [102616]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Chris Ruane, dated 14 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on teenage pregnancies by constituency.

The information requested would only be available at a disproportionate cost. Figures for health authority areas are published annually.

Financial Services Authority

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the projected costs of the Financial Services Authority for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [102753]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Full details for 1999–2000 are available in the Plan and Budget published by the FSA in February, copies of which are available in the Library. The budget for 2000–2001, with revised estimates for costs for 1999–2000, will be published by the FSA early in February 2000.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102327]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information is not held centrally for the buildings under the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Departments. It could therefore be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Export Subsidies

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the expenditure by the EU and by member states of that organisation in subsidising the export of food to nations outwith the EU in the most recent year for which such figures are available. [102630]

Ms Quin: In the 1998 budget year expenditure on export refunds under the Common Agricultural Policy to non-EU countries was 4.8 billion ecu. This was from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, there being no expenditure by individual member states on export refunds.

Beef on the Bone

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to lift the beef on the bone ban. [101126]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to my right hon. Friend the Minister's statement to the House on 30 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 151W. Subject to the outcome of the statutory consultation now under way, and Parliamentary approval of the necessary legislative changes, it is the Government's intention to lift the retail ban on beef on the bone with effect from Friday 17 December. A copy of the consultation package is available in the Library of the House.

Agricultural Support

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate how much will be paid to British farmers in 1999–2000 in support of their incomes by *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* the British Government; and if he will make a statement. [102223]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Forecast figures for 1999–2000 are unavailable. "Agriculture in the UK 1999", which will show estimates of payments to farmers in 1999, will be published on 16 March 2000.

Farm-assured Schemes

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with European Union agriculture ministers about the level of regulation of farm assured schemes; what assessment he has made of the extent to which rules governing such schemes are being followed in other EU member states; and if he will make a statement. [102221]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* None. Assurance schemes are framed by industry in the light of local circumstances.

Food Labelling

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what regulations exist to ensure that food labelling is not misleading *(a)* generally and *(b)* regarding content and country of origin; and if he will make a statement. [102224]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]: (a)* The Food Safety Act 1990 makes it an offence for anyone selling a food product to describe it in a way which is false or likely to mislead the consumer as to its nature, substance or quality. It is also an offence under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 for a product to carry a false or misleading description.

(b) The Food Labelling Regulations 1996 (as amended) require labels to contain quite detailed information about the product, including its name and a list of ingredients.

Place of origin marking is required where failure to provide it may mislead the purchaser as to the product's true origin.

We are consulting interested parties on draft guidelines which emphasises the need to ensure that, where origin markings are provided, they are accurate and do not mislead consumers.

Over-thirty-months Scheme

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he plans to have with EU agriculture ministers about the Over-thirty-months Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [102219]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* No such discussions are planned. In due course it may be appropriate to discuss the Over-thirty-month Scheme with European partners following advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee on the over-thirty-month rule.

Agricultural Wages Board

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the Government's consultation paper concerning the future of the Agricultural Wages Board. [102564]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* As part of the Government's quinquennial review programme, a Consultation Paper on the Future Rationale for statutory Wage and Other Controls in Agriculture and the Operation of the Agricultural Wages Board and the Agricultural Wages Committee was published on 6 December. Copies have been placed in the Library of both Houses. Comments are required by 31 March 2000.

Departmental Meat Supplies

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the country of origin of meat sold in his Department's buildings in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [102457]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* All my Department's catering facilities are run by contractors. Where they source their purchases is a matter for them. We have urged them wherever possible to buy British meat which we and they know makes commercial sense.

Plant Health Guide

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department will publish a revised plant health guide for importers. [101733]

Ms Quin: The current edition of the Guide was published in October 1998. A revised edition will be published when required to reflect significant changes in plant health legislation.

Thatching Reeds

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assistance his Department gives to encourage the production and harvesting of the reeds required for thatching roofs. [101893]

Ms Quin: This Department provides some payments under its agri-environment schemes for the creation, restoration and management of reedbeds as a habitat. This is not confined to reeds used for thatching. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme, Avalon Marshes Special Project, however, specifically targets the creation of reedbeds to be used for thatching.

MAFF, along with EU, The Broads Authority, English Nature, Anglian water and the RSPB, are involved in funding a research and development project aimed at establishing and demonstrating new machinery and techniques for managing wetland reedbeds and fens. The result of this work may provide techniques which benefit the production of reeds for thatching.

The Rural Enterprise Scheme, part of the package of measures under the Rural Development regulation announced by the Minister on 7 December, will provide support for a range of rural activities including renovation and development of villages and protection and conservation of the rural heritage; and encouragement for tourism and craft activities. The detailed operation of this scheme has yet to be finalised but the support provided might include various aspects of the production, harvesting and use of reeds.

Abattoirs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many abattoirs are equipped to deal with the slaughter of organically reared animals; and what are their locations. [101146]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* 29 abattoirs in England are registered with approved organic inspection bodies to slaughter organically reared animals. They are distributed widely throughout the country.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many operating abattoirs there were in each year from 1 May 1969 to 1 May 1999 inclusive. [101148]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 4 December 1999]:* At 1 May 1999 there were 477 licensed slaughterhouses in England (350 red meat and 127 poultry meat). The table gives end year figures of licensed red meat slaughterhouses for each year from 1975 to 1998. Also shown are the end year figures of licensed poultry meat slaughterhouses from 1983 to 1998. Prior to 1993, slaughterhouses in England were not licensed by MAFF, but by local authorities. The figures for 1975 to 1992 have therefore been derived from records of State Veterinary Service visits during each year and are approximate. No figures are available prior to 1975. For poultry meat slaughterhouses, no figures are available prior to 1983. It is not possible to identify how many of the licensed slaughterhouses detailed were operating at any given period.

Year	*Red meat*	*Poultry meat*
1975	1,385	—
1976	1,320	—
1977	1,280	—
1978	1,145	—
1979	975	—
1980	960	—
1981	910	—

Year [1]	Red meat	Poultry meat
1982	840	—
1983	875	111
1984	860	108
1985	850	108
1986	815	102
1987	795	104
1988	780	104
1989	690	107
1990	645	98
1991	595	98
1992	540	93
1993	434	98
1994	424	137
1995	402	144
1996	384	144
1997	375	131
1998	360	131
1999	350	127

[1] As at 31 December

[2] As at 31 May

Petsmart

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the trading practices of Petsmart; and what response he has made. [102759]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has to date not received any representations on the trading practices of Petsmart.

Cardboard Egg Boxes

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his policy on the re-use of cardboard egg boxes; and if he will make a statement. [101701]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* EU egg marketing regulations cover the labelling and use of egg boxes. To ensure the consumer is not misled the regulations do not permit the re-use of small packs because of the difficulty of ensuring the obliteration and re-printing of the information they are required to carry.

BSE

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the research into the causes of BSE in cattle that has been published by Professor Alan Ebringer and Professor John Pirt of King's College, London. [101700]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Professors Ebringer, Pirt and others have published two papers postulating a possible alternative theory of autoimmunity for BSE in cattle and multiple sclerosis in man. In the third and latest paper, from a small study funded by MAFF, they report elevated levels of antibodies against brain components in the sera of BSE-affected cattle. Professor Ebringer claims that this supports his alternative theory for BSE. The work funded by MAFF should go some way to provide scientifically based information either to support or refute this theory.

Farm Animal Welfare

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the recent reports he has received about welfare standards in the Dutch pig industry; and if he will make a statement. [101699]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* I am aware both of a survey report on the website of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture about compliance levels with Dutch pig welfare rules and of a booklet setting out new Dutch welfare rules for pigs. Publication of both the booklet and the material on the website is a matter for the Dutch authorities. I have not formally been sent copies of these documents but both the Prime Minister and I have received letters from the Dutch Meat Board about their pork quality assurance scheme.

Beef Sales

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the budget for the promotion campaign of British beef abroad being led by the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin). [102061]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Minister of State will lead a team to target several key markets to try to agree the export health certification necessary to allow imports of British beef. The cost of this will be met from existing budgets, as part of our ongoing activities to get import bans lifted around the world.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of the meat and meat offal of bovine animals exported in 1995 would be eligible for export under the Date-Based Export Scheme. [102060]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* None. It is a fundamental condition of the Date Based Export Scheme that among other things the animals from which beef for export is derived must have been born after 1 August 1996.

GM Foods

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list research funded by his Department into GM food and crops giving *(a)* the research project title, *(b)* the project reference number, *(c)* the research contractors, *(d)* the date on which the research was completed or is due to be completed and *(e)* the date on which the results will be published. [101751]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* Research projects funded by my Department and relevant to genetic modification are listed in a table which has been placed in the Library. The research aims to further the understanding of the safety of genetically modified foods and of the risks genetically modified crops might pose to the agricultural environment. The research also underpins the science needed to understand gene function and to improve the technology of genetic modification, for example by limiting gene expression to specific plant

tissues or improving stability of genes. Final reports of the projects are listed on the MAFF website usually within three months of the end of the project, the results of the research are also published in the scientific literature.

Overproduction

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which items of food are subject to overproduction within the EU; what quantities are involved; and what the change in the situation has been in the last year. [102631]

Ms Quin: The figures for food put into EU public intervention together with the percentage change in intervention stocks over the last 12 months are shown in the following table.

Changes in levels of major intervention stocks over the last 12 months in the EU

	Intervention stocks (thousand tonnes)			
Commodity	*1998*	*1999*	*Percentage change*	*Reference date*
Beef	477	226	−53	July
Cereals (Total)	11,809	12,737	8	October
Barley	6,707	4,971	−26	October
Durum	0	0	0	October
Maize	712	44	−94	October
Rye	2,399	3,104	29	October
Wheat	1,983	4,569	130	October
Dairy Products				
Butter	4	48	1,100	October
Skimmed Milk Powder	205	226	10	October
Olive Oil	100	25	−75	October

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 15 December 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Drink Driving

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what extra measures he proposes in order to achieve reductions in drink driving offences over the Christmas and new year holiday period. [101664]

Mr. Hill: My noble Friend Lord Whitty launched the Government's Christmas and new year anti-drink-drive publicity campaign on 1 December. The campaign is designed to reduce the number of deaths and injuries resulting from drink-driving especially during the coming holiday period, and also throughout the year. It has a particular significance this year because of the additional celebrations to mark the Millennium. The campaign emphasises the importance of planning ahead to ensure a safe journey home from festive celebrations. It also reinforces our message that drivers can still be well over the legal blood alcohol limit the following day after consuming alcohol and therefore should exercise particular caution in deciding when to resume driving. Nearly one in 10 of positive breath tests at the scene of an accident results from tests taken between 6am and 1pm.

Street Works

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the compliance rate of utilities in using permanent reinstatement materials as set out in the statutory code of practice under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991. [102119]

Mr. Hill: Research carried out for the Department by the Transport Research Laboratory, covering a period up to early 1998, showed that there was room for improvement in utilities' standards of compliance with the statutory code of practice on reinstatement (the reinstatement specification). Street works and the reinstatements after works are subject to inspection by street authorities (normally the local highway authorities), who have powers under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 to ensure compliance with the specification.

The research is contributing to the revision of the specification, a new edition of which we expect to be published next year.

Jet-skis

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ban the use of jet-skis in environmentally sensitive areas. [102169]

Mr. Meacher: Some environmentally sensitive areas already have local byelaws imposing strict speed limits, which result in the exclusion of jet-skis. We expect local authorities—who are responsible for making most local byelaws—to continue to judge each case on its merits.

Last year's report of the Review of Byelaw Powers for the Coast recommended that local authorities should be given more general powers to regulate activities on the coast which affect the wider environment, such as the use of personal watercraft. We have given a long-term commitment to introduce legislation to take forward those recommendations in the Review which require changes to the law. In the meantime, we have published a voluntary code of best and safe practice for leisure craft users, and we are exploring options for a voluntary boat registration and identification scheme, which would include jet-skis.

Sea Rescues and Emergencies Database

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given on the collation of data for the Sea Rescues and Emergencies Database. [102561]

Mr. Hill: The Sea Rescues and Emergencies Database (SEAREM) is owned, administered and funded by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) who are a registered charity and are independent of Government.

The only Government contribution towards SEAREM is in the form of data supplied by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), an executive agency of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and the Defence Analytical Services Agency (DASA), an executive agency of the Ministry of Defence. Guidance for the making of data contributions has, therefore, been issued to these agencies from the RNLI.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the inclusion of rescues by local authority lifeguards within the Sea Rescues and Emergencies Database. [102563]

Mr. Hill: Local Authority lifeguards make no direct contribution to the Sea Rescues and Emergencies Database (SEAREM), as they do not have access to the database. If local authority lifeguards wish to provide data to the SEAREM database they do so through either the Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) of the Surf Life Saving Association (SLSA) who, as direct contributors, are able to access SEAREM database.

Time Savings

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons *(a)* time savings to road users are incorporated in net present value calculations of the benefits of road capital schemes and *(b)* time savings to rail users are excluded from rail investment appraisals. [102597]

Mr. Hill: Road and rail investment schemes are appraised against the Government's five over-arching criteria as set out in the Integrated Transport White Paper: "environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration". Time savings are included under the economy criterion for both road and rail appraisals.

Air Services

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in which negotiations about new air services between London and the United States *(a)* he and *(b)* other Ministers in his Department have been involved since 1997; and what criteria determined the level of ministerial involvement in each case. [102779]

Mr. Mullin: Negotiations between the UK and other countries are conducted by officials after consultation with Ministers. The level of ministerial involvement in any instance is determined having regard to the circumstances of the case. In the case of negotiations with the United States, Ministers have taken a close interest.

Airlines

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he received from British Airways and Virgin Atlantic prior to the granting of a slot to United Airlines to operate an air service between Boston and Heathrow; and if he will make a statement. [102780]

Mr. Mullin: Both airlines submitted views on the legal question of whether the application by United Airlines for a permit to operate a service between Boston and London had to be regarded as an entitlement under the terms of Bermuda II. These views were taken into account in reaching the decision to issue a permit.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the decisions by the United States Administration and Her Majesty's Government to allow *(a)* British Airways to commence a service between Denver and Gatwick and *(b)* US Airways to commence a service between Charlotte and Gatwick were taken (i) jointly or (ii) separately. [102797]

Mr. Mullin: The entitlement to operate these services derives from the Air Services Agreement between the UK and the US, commonly referred to as Bermuda II. The UK issued a permit for the US Airways Charlotte service in April 1998. The US was slow to issue a permit for the BA Denver service, and did not do so until July 1998.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he held with the US Secretary of Transportation before agreeing to grant a slot to United Airlines to operate an air service between Boston and Heathrow; and if he will make a statement. [102782]

Mr. Mullin: No discussions were held with the US Department of Transportation before a permit was issued to United Airlines to operate a service between Boston and London. The Government takes no part in the allocation of slots at slot-constrained UK airports; these are allocated by Airport Co-ordination Ltd.

Road Improvement Schemes

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the major road improvement schemes that are now taking place within the Greater London area. [102708]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to reply to my hon. Friend.

Letter from David York, to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 15 December 1999:

The Minister for Transport for London, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about major road improvement schemes that are now taking place in Greater London. I am replying in the absence of the Chief Executive, Peter Nutt.

Landscaping work is being carried out on the A12 Hackney M11 Link Road which opened to traffic on 6th October. The final section of the A13 West of Heathway to Mardyke scheme opened to traffic on 14 December and work continues on the London Primary Route Network Signing project to redesign and replace direction signs on London's primary routes within the M25 corridor. This work is being carried out in three phases because of its complexity and geographical spread. Two of the phases, covering East London and South West London, will be completed shortly, whilst work on the third phase, covering North West London, is expected to be completed in Autumn 2000.

There are also a number of schemes in the pipeline. We are nearly ready to award a contract for the A13 Thames Gateway DBFO project which includes improvements at Ironbridge-Canning Town, the A13/A117 junction and Movers Lane junction. Subject to the completion of the necessary statutory procedures, it could also include improvements to the A13/A117 Prince Regent Lane junction.

Detailed design work for the A40 Western Avenue bridge replacement scheme will start next year and we are preparing tender documents for the A23 Coulsdon Inner Relief Road improvement scheme so that it could start in early 2002. There are also four proposals to improve the A406 North Circular Road at Bounds Green, Regents Park and Golders Green and the A205 at Catford Town Centre. These schemes will transfer to the Greater London Authority (GLA) who will study the role of these roads as part of their development of a transport strategy for London. It will be for the GLA to decide whether or not to take the schemes forward.

One local authority major improvement is also underway, the A240 North South strategy for the London Borough of Kensington.

Pollution

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the revenue to be derived from implementing the integrated pollution prevention and control regulation. [102582]

Mr. Hill: The phased implementation of integrated pollution prevention and control (IPPC) regulation extends up to 2007. In 2000–01, its first operational year, the revenue from IPPC regulation is estimated to be approximately £4.0 million.

This information updates the estimate given in the Environment Agency's corporate plan published in September 1999.

Benefits

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the levels of capital and income disregards for the benefits for which his Department is responsible. [102511]

Mr. Mullin: Benefits are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security.

Coulsdon Inner Relief Road

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when work will commence on the Coulsdon Inner Relief Road. [102501]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from David York, to Mr. Richard Ottaway, dated 15 December 1999:

The Minister for Transport for London, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the start of works for the A23 Coulsdon Inner Relief Road. I am replying in the absence of the Chief Executive, Peter Nutt.

The scheme was included in the Targeted Programme of Improvements announced by the Secretary of State in July 1998. It will transfer to Transport for London in July 2000.

We have recently appointed Consultant Engineers to prepare tender documents to allow work to start in early 2002.

Plutonium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports have been received by his Department from the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate in respect of its investigation into the quality control of plutonium MOX fuel manufactured at Sellafield. [102484]

Mr. Meacher: DETR Ministers have received a number of briefings from HSE's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) on its investigation into the falsification of quality assurance data for fuel manufactured in the MOX demonstration facility at BNFL's Sellafield plant. This investigation has concluded that the automated 100 per cent. check on pellet diameters should provide high confidence that all of the MOX fuel which has been delivered from Sellafield to Japan will be safe in use. A copy of the letter that NII sent to the Japanese Embassy advising them of this conclusion has been placed in the Library of the House.

NII is not currently in a position to comment further on its investigations since this could prejudice possible enforcement action.

Civil Aviation Authority

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the projected costs of the Civil Aviation Authority for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [102758]

Mr. Mullin: The projected operating costs for the Civil Aviation Authority (including National Air Traffic Services Ltd.) are as follows:

(a) 1999–2000: £588.2 million

(b) 2000–01: £611.7 million.

These costs will be recovered through charges levied on users in respect of the services provided by the CE.

Privatised Ports Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what undertakings were given at the time of each privatisation of ports, where ports police forces existed, in relation to their future management and independence by the purchasers; and what scrutiny has been conducted as to the fulfilment of these undertakings since privatisation. [102436]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* I am not aware of any undertakings given in such cases.

Central Government Grant (Local Authorities)

Mr. Curry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the money allocated to local authorities from central Government in the form of *(a)* rate support grant and *(b)* specific grant in each of the 10 most recent years for which information is available. [102466]

Ms Armstrong: English local authorities have reported receiving the following central government grants. Data for community charge grant, SSA reduction grant and redistributed non-domestic rates have been included as these also provide unhypothecated funding for local authorities.

Central Government grants and redistributed non-domestic rates

£ million

	Revenue support grant [1]	*Community charge grant*	*SSA reduction grant*	*Specific grant inside AEF* [2]	*Redistributed non-domestic rates*
1990–91	9,468	—	—	3,459	10,429
1992–92	9,652	4,805	—	4,163	12,408
1992–93	[3]16,605	—	—	4,363	12,306
1993–94	17,033	—	—	4,664	11,559
1994–95	18,479	—	280	4,930	10,685
1995–96	18,296	—	261	4,779	11,354
1996–97	18,001	—	220	4,781	12,736
1997–98	18,650	—	123	5,068	12,027
1998–99	[4]19,480	—	102	5,598	12,524
1999–2000	[5]19,875	—	[7]119	5,874	13,612
2000–01	[6]19,403	—	[7]51	6,877	15,400

[1] Excluding RSG to Specified Bodies

[2] Specific, Special and Supplementary Grants

[3] Community Charge Grant was incorporated in Revenue Support Grant in 1992–93

[4] Provisional outturn

[5] Budget estimates

[6] Consultation

[7] Includes Central Support Reduction Grant

GM Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has evaluated on leakage into soil from GM insect-resistant maize of the insecticide made by the plant as a consequence of its genetic modification; if he will instruct his officials to seek to follow up research of this kind; and if he will make a statement. [102722]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* The science journal *Nature* published a report on 2 December 1999 on leakage into the soil from crops genetically modified to express insecticidal peptides from Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt). I shall be asking the statutory Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) to consider this paper at their next meeting. Their advice, including any recommendations for research, will be published. I will then act to commission further research as appropriate. However, no Bt plants are being grown or trialled in the UK, and we have assurances from industry that they have no plans to introduce such crops in the near future.

Rough Sleepers

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many rough sleepers there were in each of the last 30 months for which figures are available in *(a)* London, *(b)* Bristol, *(c)* Cardiff, *(d)* Glasgow, *(e)* Leeds, *(f)* Liverpool and *(g)* Birmingham. [101524]

Ms Armstrong: The following table sets out an estimate of the number of people sleeping rough on any one night in London, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool and Birmingham, as at June 1998 and June 1999.

	June 1998	*June 1999*
Greater London	621	635
Bristol	42	32
Leeds	8	17
Liverpool	17	30
Birmingham	56	43

The figures for 1998 are based on single night street counts and were published as part of my answer of 19 May 1999, *Official Report,* columns 355–62W, which gave an estimate of the number of people sleeping rough across England. This estimate formed a baseline figure for the Government's target to reduce rough sleeping in England by two thirds by 2002.

The figures for 1999 are being published today as part of the breakdown of the latest national estimate, showing the position as at June 1999. This shows that the number of people sleeping rough in England, on any one night, fell from 1,850 in June 1998 to 1,633 in June 1999. Copies of the full breakdown are available from the Library. Responsibility for the Rough Sleepers Initiative in Scotland is a devolved matter. I understand, however, that no comparable figures are available for Glasgow. A single night street count in central Glasgow in 1997 found 53 people sleeping rough. No counts have been undertaken since.

Responsibility for rough sleeping in Wales is also a devolved matter. I understand, however, that an independent report has recently been prepared for the National Assembly for Wales and local authorities in Wales on the incidence of rough sleeping in Wales and its causes, and to advise on effective strategies for assisting rough sleepers. According to this independent report, single night street counts in September 1997 found 12 people sleeping rough in Cardiff city centre, and in September 1998 found 20 people.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce *(a)* his plans to meet the Prime Minister's target of reducing rough sleeping by at least two thirds by 2002 and *(b)* the latest figures for the numbers of rough sleepers in England. [103041]

Ms Armstrong: The Government's strategy on rough sleeping will be published later today and copies placed in the Library. We are also publishing today the latest estimate of the number of people sleeping rough in England on any one night. These figures show that the number of people sleeping rough in England fell from 1,850 in June 1998 to 1,633 in June 1999. Copies of the full breakdown are available in the Library.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Montenegro

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid has been given to Montenegro in 1999; and how much is planned for 2000. [101464]

Mr. Foulkes: We expect to provide around £92,000 in bilateral development technical assistance to Montenegro in the 1999–2000 financial year. This is mainly in support of privatisation programmes and public administration reform. Work was disrupted by the Kosovo crisis, during which we provided around £650,000 in emergency humanitarian assistance.

For 2000–01, we are considering renewed activities in economic reform, support to civil society and public administration reform. The level of support has yet to be determined.

The European Commission has committed about 56 million euro to Montenegro since April 1998 for public administration reform, private sector development, agriculture, budgetary support and humanitarian aid. The UK share of this is some 17 per cent.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Vaccine Damage (Compensation)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will ensure the payment of compensation to those damaged by vaccines. [102167]

Mr. Bayley: The existing Vaccine Damage Payment scheme, which has been in place since 1979, provides

a one-off payment to people severely disabled by vaccination against certain diseases. The scheme is not intended as compensation but is designed to ease the present and future burdens of those suffering from vaccine damage, and their families.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102337]

Angela Eagle: The utilisation of specific rooms within individual Departmental buildings is a matter for local management. The information is not collated centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102369]

Angela Eagle: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Employment Statistics (North-east)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many full-time employees were employed in each metropolitan, unitary or county area in North-East England by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies, in each of the last three years for which information is available. [102432]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Number of DSS permanent staff in the north-east by area and agency

30 November 1999	*BA*	*CA*[1]	*ITSA*	*HQ*	*CSA*	*WPA*	*Total*
Northumberland	430	0	0	0	9	0	439
Newcastle	3,359	0	561	204	710	0	4,834
Washington	2,550	0	87	7	0	0	2,644
Wearside	457	0	0	0	18	0	475
County Durham	662	0	0	0	56	0	718
South Tyneside	188	0	0	0	0	0	188
Gateshead	218	0	0	0	66	0	284
Teesside	807	0	0	0	30	2	839
Totals	8,671	0	648	211	889	2	10,421

Note:
[1] With effect from 1 April 1999, all CA staff transferred to Inland Revenue.

Number of DSS permanent staff in the north-east area and agency

	BA	*CA*	*ITSA*	*HQ*	*CSA*	*WPA*	*Total*
30 November 1998							
Northumberland	448	8	0	0	18	0	474
Newcastle	3,235	4,360	526	208	487	2	8,818
Washington	2,023	0	89	3	0	0	2,115
Wearside	450	0	0	0	21	0	471
County Durham	679	21	0	0	65	0	765
South Tyneside	193	0	0	0	0	0	193
Gateshead	208	42	0	0	61	0	311
Teesside	784	42	0	0	30	0	856
Totals	8,020	4,473	615	211	682	2	14,003
30 November 1997							
Northumberland	470	7	0	0	24	0	501
Newcastle	3,097	4,336	494	230	459	3	8,619
Washington	1,766	0	98	0	0	0	1,864
Wearside	462	0	0	0	21	0	483
County Durham	618	20	0	0	39	0	677
South Tyneside	197	0	0	0	0	0	197
Gateshead	231	48	0	0	40	0	319
Teesside	810	38	0	0	35	2	885
Totals	7,651	4,449	592	230	618	5	13,545

Notes:
1. As staff details are not held by county or metropolitan areas, we have grouped information from our offices to give approximate coverage by those areas. The following groupings have been used:
Northumberland—Ashington, Berwick, Blyth, Hexham, North Shields and Wallsend
Newcastle—Broadway West, Gosforth locations including North-East outstation, Newcastle Central Office and local offices
Washington—Durham House and Child Benefit Centre
Wearside—Sunderland and Wearside DIRC
County Durham—Bishop Auckland, Chester-le-Street, Darlington, Durham, Houghton-le-Spring, Peterlee, Seaham and Stanley
South Tyneside—Jarrow and South Shields
Gateshead—Gateshead Local Office
Teesside—Eston, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Northallerton, Redcar and Stockton.
2. "Full-time employees" has been interpreted to mean all permanent staff, including those on non-standard hours; and excluding staff who are casuals or on fixed term contracts.

Pension Sharing Regulations

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he plans to consult on draft pension sharing regulations. [103126]

Mr. Rooker: The consultation document "Pension Sharing on Divorce: Consultation on Draft Regulations" is published today. The consultation period will run until 14 February 2000. Copies have been placed in the Library and the Vote Office. The document is also available on the DSS website.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102039]

Mr. Mandelson: Following the devolution of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 December 1999, the Assembly took on responsibility for all the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments. The Secretary of State's responsibility is now limited to the Northern Ireland Office, and the following information relates to that Department only.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which came into force in 1996, removed the requirement for individuals with disabilities to register as disabled and, as a result, such information is no longer held on staff in the Northern Ireland Office. Individuals may, however, provide information regarding their disabilities on a voluntary basis. Statistics based on this information indicate that 4.04 per cent. of staff in the Northern Ireland Office have declared that they have a disability under the Act.

The Northern Ireland Office is an Equal Opportunities employer and has a number of policies in place relating to the recruitment and retention of people with disabilities. Where open recruitment competitions are advertised, disabled people are among those under-represented groups who are encouraged to submit applications. The NIO also sponsors a number of people with disabilities to provide them with work in the Department under the Training and Employment Agency's Employment Support Scheme.

The NIO has a dedicated Disabled Person's Liaison Officer whose role is to provide assistance and advice to staff and managers on what reasonable adjustments can be made to enable staff with disabilities to do their jobs. Consideration is also being given to joining the Positive about Disabled People "Two Ticks" scheme to indicate the NIO's commitment to people with disabilities.

Since 1997 the Northern Ireland Office has funded a bursary for staff with disabilities. This provides the bursary holder with a two year programme of training and mentoring to enable them to develop the competencies needed to gain promotion. Two members of NIO staff are currently benefiting from the scheme.

Parades Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what correspondence he has received from outgoing members of the Parades Commission; and if he will place copies in the Library. [101889]

Mr. Ingram: No such correspondence has been received.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reason he is to review the workings of the Parades Commission; what are the terms of reference of this review; what organisations and individuals have been consulted over the terms of reference; and what body has been appointed to conduct the review. [101887]

Mr. Ingram: On 8 October the previous Secretary of State announced a review of the workings of the Parades Commission. The terms of reference are:

> "Within the existing framework of law and structures, and taking account of views received from interested parties and the experience of the marching seasons over the last two years, to consider
>
> possible ways of achieving even greater acceptance of the approach to handling contentious parades; and, in particular,
>
> the arrangements for mediation;
>
> and to report to Ministers by the end of December 1999".

As part of the announcement the Secretary of State made a general invitation for contributions from any interested parties. Subsequently a wide range of interested parties have been specifically invited to contribute.

Officials from my Security Policy and Operations Division have been asked to conduct the review.

Fire Brigade

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what was the composition of the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade by (i) gender and (ii) by perceived community origin *(a)* in the last month for which figures were available, *(b)* for the same month five years ago and *(c)* 10 years ago; [101886]

(2) when the emblem of the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade was introduced. [101885]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Security Policy and Operations Department

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the functions of the Security Policy and Operations Department; how many staff, at what grades, are assigned to this unit; and how many additional staff have been (i) appointed and (ii) seconded in the last six months. [101888]

Mr. Ingram: The aim and objectives of the Security Policy and Operations Division were set out on pages 32 and 33 of the Government's Expenditure Plans 1999–2000 to 2001–02 for Northern Ireland (Cm 4217). A copy is available in the Library of the House.

The Division has 20.5 staff across the full range of administrative grades from Senior Civil Service to D2. In the last six months an additional 1.5 staff have been appointed—none have been seconded.

Civil Service Review

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the terms of reference of the review of the composition of the senior grades of the Civil Service; what is the composition of the senior grades of the Civil Service; what is the composition of the review team; when the review began; when it will report; and when its recommendations will be published. [101884]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Criminal Justice (Working Group)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the membership of the working group announced on 4 November 1998 to consider the implementation of the recommendations of the Third report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of session 1997–98 (HC337); how many times the group has met; what representations it received from the Northern Ireland Police Federation; and if he will make a statement on its terms of reference and work to date. [101877]

Mr. Ingram: The working group on membership of exclusive organisations within the Criminal Justice system comprised representatives of the Northern Ireland Office, the RUC, the Police Authority for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Court Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Department of the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. The working group met formally on four occasions and received no representations from the Northern Ireland Police Federation. The working group's terms of reference were as announced on 4 November 1998. It submitted its report to the Secretary of State in July 1999. The Report of the Independent Commission on Policing (published on 9 September) proposed that police officers should be obliged to register their interests and associations. The Government are currently considering the responses to consultation on all the Commission's recommendations and awaiting the conclusions of the Criminal Justice Review.

TREASURY

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102076]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The information requested can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Low Birthweight Babies

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the proportion of low birthweight babies in each health authority area of England, in each of the last five years. [102228]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 15 December 1999:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on low birthweight babies. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

The information requested is shown in the attached table.

Percentage of live births with a stated birthweight less than 2,500g England, regional offices and health authorities [1], 1994–1998

Health Authority	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
England	7.0	7.3	7.3	7.5	7.5
Northern and Yorkshire	7.3	7.7	7.4	7.9	7.6
Bradford	9.3	8.8	8.7	9.1	9.8
Calderdale and Kirklees	7.7	8.7	7.7	8.4	8.2
County Durham	6.6	7.3	7.2	7.8	7.0
East Riding	7.2	6.9	7.5	8.2	7.4
Gateshead and South Tyneside	7.3	7.9	7.4	8.1	6.8
Leeds	8.0	8.5	8.1	8.2	8.4
Newcastle and North Tyneside	8.2	7.7	7.9	8.3	7.5
North Cumbria	5.9	6.6	7.0	7.5	6.6
Northumberland	6.7	7.3	6.0	7.1	6.7
North Yorkshire	5.8	6.5	5.5	6.6	6.0
Sunderland	6.3	7.6	8.0	8.1	8.4
Tees	7.3	7.8	7.3	7.6	7.8
Wakefield	7.6	7.9	7.6	7.9	7.7
Trent	7.0	7.3	7.3	7.6	7.8
Barnsley	6.7	7.6	6.6	6.9	7.8
Doncaster	7.0	7.5	6.8	8.8	7.7
Leicestershire	7.5	8.0	8.2	8.2	8.0
Lincolnshire	6.1	6.4	6.2	6.8	7.3
North Derbyshire	6.5	5.9	6.1	6.5	6.4
North Nottinghamshire	7.2	8.0	8.0	8.9	7.7
Nottingham	7.8	7.5	7.4	7.2	7.8
Rotherham	7.3	8.0	7.1	7.3	7.8
Sheffield	7.8	7.9	7.9	7.7	8.4
South Derbyshire	6.2	6.5	6.9	7.0	7.9
South Humber	6.3	7.1	7.0	7.5	8.2
Anglia and Oxford	6.6	6.8	6.9	7.0	7.0
Bedfordshire	6.8	6.7	7.3	7.2	7.6
Berkshire	6.6	6.9	6.8	7.1	7.6
Buckinghamshire	6.6	6.8	6.7	7.2	6.6
Cambridge and Huntingdon	6.3	6.8	6.5	6.2	5.8
East Norfolk	6.7	7.3	6.7	6.7	6.9
Northamptonshire	7.9	7.0	7.5	7.7	7.5
North West Anglia	6.4	7.6	7.8	7.4	8.1
Oxfordshire	5.8	5.7	6.2	6.3	5.9
Suffolk	6.4	6.3	6.5	6.9	7.0
North Thames	7.2	7.5	7.4	7.6	7.6
Barking and Havering	6.4	6.2	6.8	7.4	6.8
Barnet	7.0	7.8	7.5	7.9	7.2
Brent and Harrow	8.6	8.6	9.0	8.7	8.4
Camden and Islington	7.8	7.4	7.5	7.8	7.2
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	7.4	7.7	7.7	7.8	8.2
East and North Hertfordshire	6.7	6.8	6.5	6.6	6.1
East London and The City	9.0	9.0	8.9	9.7	9.7
Enfield and Haringey	7.5	7.9	7.7	8.2	8.3
Hillingdon	6.7	8.3	7.2	7.5	8.2
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	7.4	7.8	7.7	7.6	7.5
North Essex	6.0	6.5	6.3	6.2	6.4
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	8.5	8.3	7.9	8.0	7.7
South Essex	5.8	5.7	5.9	6.7	6.3
West Hertfordshire	5.9	6.5	6.9	6.0	6.8

Percentage of live births with a stated birthweight less than 2,500g England, regional offices and health authorities [1], 1994–1998

Health Authority	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
South Thames	6.8	7.0	6.9	7.0	7.0
Bexley and Greenwich	6.9	6.9	7.4	7.3	7.6
Bromley	7.0	6.9	6.9	6.4	6.3
Croydon	7.4	8.3	7.8	7.9	8.7
East Kent	6.4	6.7	6.2	7.4	6.3
East Surrey	6.9	6.5	6.3	5.8	5.9
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	6.6	6.4	6.7	7.1	6.3
Kingston and Richmond	5.8	5.7	5.9	6.2	5.4
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	8.9	9.1	8.7	8.8	8.8
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	7.1	7.1	6.9	6.7	6.9
West Kent	5.9	6.7	6.6	6.3	6.9
West Surrey	6.3	6.4	5.7	6.2	6.5
West Sussex	6.3	6.6	6.4	6.8	6.6
South and West	6.4	6.7	6.8	6.7	6.6
Avon	6.3	6.8	7.0	7.0	6.3
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	6.2	6.8	6.7	5.8	6.2
Dorset	6.5	6.3	6.5	6.8	7.0
Gloucestershire	7.3	6.9	6.5	6.8	6.5
Isle of Wight	5.9	6.5	7.1	7.3	7.3
North and East Devon	6.5	6.7	6.9	6.3	6.7
North and Mid Hampshire	5.9	6.2	7.2	6.2	6.4
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	6.7	6.9	6.7	6.4	6.6
Somerset	6.0	6.5	6.7	6.4	6.3
Southampton and South West Hampshire	6.3	7.1	6.8	6.6	7.0
South and West Devon	6.2	6.6	6.7	7.4	6.7
Wiltshire	6.9	7.0	6.6	7.3	6.5
West Midlands	7.6	8.0	8.1	8.1	8.4
Birmingham	8.8	9.5	9.2	9.4	10.0
Coventry	9.0	8.7	9.7	8.7	8.7
Dudley	7.7	7.9	8.5	8.3	8.8
Herefordshire	6.1	6.4	6.8	6.9	6.7
North Staffordshire	6.4	7.1	7.4	7.0	8.2
Sandwell	9.9	9.7	9.5	10.0	10.4
Shropshire	6.0	7.1	7.0	6.7	7.0
Solihull	7.1	6.6	8.5	7.2	6.6
South Staffordshire	6.7	6.6	7.0	6.5	7.4
Walsall	7.6	8.8	9.1	10.1	10.3
Warwickshire	6.8	6.9	6.3	6.7	6.7
Wolverhampton	8.3	9.2	9.6	10.1	10.0
Worcestershire	6.4	7.1	6.6	7.2	6.6
North West	7.0	7.7	7.7	7.8	8.1
Bury and Rochdale	7.8	8.3	8.2	8.6	9.2
East Lancashire	7.8	8.7	7.7	8.3	9.5
Liverpool	7,9	8.3	8.5	7.7	8.2
Manchester	8.3	9.9	9.2	9.2	9.3
Morecambe Bay	7.3	7.4	7.3	6.2	6.9
North Cheshire	5.4	5.5	6.6	6.2	6.5
North West Lancashire	7.1	7.1	7.6	8.1	8.3
St. Helen's and Knowsley	6.6	7.9	8.0	8.1	8.5
Salford and Trafford	7.9	8.0	7.8	8.3	8.3
Sefton	6.6	7.1	7.2	7.6	7.9
South Cheshire	5.5	6.5	6.4	6.6	6.1
South Lancashire	6.4	6.4	6.9	7.0	6.3
Stockport	5.4	6.9	6.3	6.1	7.2
West Pennine	7.3	7.8	7.6	8.4	8.4
Wigan and Bolton	6.8	8.2	8.3	8.7	8.9
Wirral	6.3	6.6	7.6	7.0	8.0

[1] Boundaries as at 1 April 1998

Endowment Insurance

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what statutory provisions restrict the ability of policyholders to make top-up payments to long-term endowment insurance plans; and what plans he has to review these provisions. [102433]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There are no statutory provisions prohibiting top-up payments. The provision of advice on and selling of endowment policies is regulated by the Financial Services Authority. Policyholders are encouraged to seek independent financial advice before deciding on options to meet projected shortfalls in maturity.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102050]

Mr. Hain: As at 1 October 1999, 111 staff (2 per cent.) had declared themselves as disabled in a voluntary survey. The FCO is committed to the employment of people with disabilities. In September 1998 the Department qualified for the Employment Service Two ticks symbol "Positive about disabled people". Under this scheme the Department guarantees an interview to anybody with a disability where the application meets the minimum criteria for the post. Particular arrangements are put into place for tests and interviews when requested by the candidate. Reasonable adjustments are made to the working environment for new entrants with disabilities. The FCO has appointed a Disabled Persons Officer to deal with disability issues within the Office.

Diplomatic Missions

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the British diplomatic missions that have been closed during the last five years. [102407]

Mr. Hain: The British diplomatic missions that have closed in the last five years are: Douala in 1994, Kuching and Chiang Mai in 1998 and Cleveland in 1999.

In addition, the Embassy in Belgrade closed at the start of the Kosovo campaign. The Yugoslav authorities subsequently severed diplomatic relations. We have since re-established a presence in Belgrade with an British Interests Section of the Brazilian Embassy.

China

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of recent progress in co-operation with China in tackling international crime. [102704]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and President Jiang Zemin agreed on the need for further dialogue between our two countries on the problems of international crime and drugs in their meeting during the Chinese State Visit. I raised the issue of drugs with the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister during my recent visit to China and we agreed to continue close co-operation in this field, where we have had a number of small, mainly training, projects.

There have been a number of successful co-operative operations between the British and Chinese police to deal with kidnapping cases.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he discussed further co-operation in the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction when he met President Jiang Zemin during his visit to Britain. [102742]

Mr. Battle: The need for further dialogue on this subject was agreed in the Prime Minister's meeting with President Jiang Zemin during the State Visit.

EU Applicants

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those countries which *(a)* have applied for membership of the EU and *(b)* are investigating the possibility of applying for membership within the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [102459]

Mr. Vaz: The countries that have applied for membership of the EU are listed in the table. Accession negotiations started in March 1998 with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. Accession negotiations will begin in February 2000 with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia. The Helsinki European Council on 10–11 December 1999 recognised that Turkey is a candidate for membership. Norway put its application on hold in 1994 after a referendum rejected membership. Switzerland suspended its application in 1993. In 1987, the Council of Ministers did not accede to an application from Morocco. No other country has signalled an intention to apply for membership within the next 12 months. This Government strongly support EU enlargement.

Countries that have applied for EU-membership

Country	*Date of application*
Morocco	[1]20 July 1987
Turkey	14 April 1987
Cyprus	3 July 1990
Malta	[2]16 July 1990
Switzerland	[3]20 May 1992
Norway	[4]25 November 1992
Hungary	31 March 1994
Poland	5 April 1994
Romania	22 June 1995
Slovakia	27 June 1995
Latvia	13 October 1995
Estonia	24 November 1995
Lithuania	8 December 1995
Bulgaria	14 December 1995
Czech Republic	17 January 1996
Slovenia	10 June 1996

[1] EU did not accede to the request
[2] Frozen in 1996, re-activated 10 September 1998
[3] Left in abeyance 1992
[4] 1994 referendum rejected membership. Application on hold

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102363]

Mr. Chris Smith: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussions.

Sports Clubs (Personal Injury Insurance)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will introduce legislation to require sports clubs to insure team members against personal injury. [102502]

Kate Hoey: I have no plans to introduce legislation requiring sports clubs to insure their members against personal injury, but I encourage them to ensure that adequate insurance is in place. The home country Sports Councils, in co-operation with the Association of British Insurers, published a booklet in 1997 called "Managing Risks" which provides guidance on insurance for sports organisations, clubs and individuals.

Osborne House

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his plans are for the future use of those parts of Osborne House not once occupied personally by Queen Victoria and opened to the public, and of the grounds; and if he will make a statement. [102570]

Mr. Alan Howarth: As I announced on 4 February, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, has decided that it is no longer appropriate to run this part of Osborne House as a convalescent and residential home and will be seeking Parliament's approval to repeal the provisions of the Osborne Estate Act 1902 which places this responsibility on him. In the meantime the home remains open. I have asked English Heritage to bring forward proposals for the use of the accommodation currently occupied by the convalescent home.

British Olympic Facilities

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions he has had with the British Olympic Association on ensuring that a future British Olympic bid contains proposals to disperse major sporting events throughout the United Kingdom; [102804]

(2) what discussions he has had with the British Olympic Association and other interested parties on ensuring the availability of funding for Olympic facilities throughout the United Kingdom. [102803]

Kate Hoey: I am in regular discussion with the British Olympic Association and other interested parties on a number of issues including facilities to stage a future Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee require that the Olympic Games are city rather than countrywide based. The British Olympic Association, who have responsibility for UK bids for the Olympic Games, are finalising a series of feasibility studies on a London based bid and I am expecting their report shortly.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years. [99145]

Mr. Wills: All travel undertaken by civil servants in DfEE and the Employment Service (ES) complies with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code.

For DfEE, the total amount spent on civil servants' car transport in each of the last two years is £648,826 (1997–98) and £720,853 (1998–99)[1].

For ES, the total amount spent in each of the last two years is £3,462,169 (1997–98) and £4,992,971 (1998–99)[1].

[1] These figures are net of payments received from staff under DfEE/ES private user schemes.

Special Needs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure greater transparency in the allocation of funds by local education authorities to individual pupils with special educational needs. [101467]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* We have taken steps to require local education authorities to publish budget statements which make clear the amounts retained centrally and the amounts delegated to schools to make provision for children with special educational needs, with and without statements. Once budgets are delegated to schools, schools' governing bodies may take decisions on precisely how to deploy the resources available for the benefit of individual pupils. Where extra resources are required to enable a school to make the provision specified in a statement of special educational need for an individual child, the local education authority may provide support from a central resource; devolve funds for that specific child; or in some cases, the schools' delegated budget will already include funds to meet the needs of pupils with statements of special education need.

Teachers (Early Retirement)

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average time taken for the Teachers' Pension Agency to process a teacher's request for early retirement on health grounds in each of the last three years; how many such requests have been refused in each of the last three years; and how many of these refusals have been overturned on appeal. [101923]

Mr. Wicks: The administration of the Teachers' Pensions Scheme has been carried out under contract by Capita Business Services since October 1996. Details of the average time taken for the complete processing of ill-health retirement applications are not recorded, but a Statement of Service Requirements (SOSR) attached to the contract has specific targets with regard to ill-health applications. The performance of the scheme administrator is given in the following table. These targets reflect the stages in the process where responsibility for the action rests with the administrator and not with a third party. The number of years for which the information is available reflects the periodic updating of the SOSR.

Percentage

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*April-November 1999*
To complete the calculation of ill health benefits or short service incapacity grants within 20 days of receiving approval of the application	91	98	91.7
Requests for further medical evidence to be made within 5 days of notification	—	100	97.8
To inform applicants for ill health retirement of the decision within 10 days of medical advisers notification	—	—	98.9

The figures for applications rejected and successful appeals are as follows. Successful appeals usually result from further medical evidence being received.

	Number rejected	*Successful appeals*
1997–98	1,227	382
1998–99	788	179
April-September 1999	288	[1]3

[1] Does not include appeals still under consideration.

School Transport

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review arrangements for home to school transport. [102239]

Jacqui Smith: The School Travel Advisory Group is looking into all aspects of school transport and I expect to receive its recommendations early in the new year. In addition, we have a number of initiatives already in place: we have produced guidance for schools on safe routes; we are developing mapping software and a car sharing database for schools' use; we are reviewing the provision of transport for pupils with special educational needs, leading to guidance on best practice for Local Education Authorities; and we have been working with the Department of Health on "Safe and Sound", a competition for schools designed to promote healthier and sustainable school travel.

Data Protection

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the appeal to the Data Protection Registrar by the National Union of Teachers against his Department using home addresses collected for pension purposes and the General Teaching Council elections; and if he will make a statement. [102773]

Mr. Wicks: The Data Protection Registrar has confirmed that teachers' home addresses can be used for the despatch of pensions information and to form the basis of the electoral roll for the General Teaching Council.

Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102080]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Department's NDPBs spent £22.062 million on external consultants and advisers. The individual NDPB expenditure is listed on the following table.

Department for Education and Employment—expenditure on consultants and advisers

£000

May 1997 to-date	*Total*
British Educational Communications and Technology (BECTa)	865
Construction Industry Training Board (CITB)	638
Education Transfer Council (ETC)	0
Engineering Construction Industry Training Board(ECITB)	35
Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC)	147
Further Education Funding Council (FEFC)	2,510
Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)	2,847
Investors in People UK Ltd. (IIP)	4,614
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)	3,800
Remploy Ltd.	816
Students Loan Company (SLC)	1,612
Teacher Training Agency (TTA)	4,174
Advisory Committee for Disabled People in Employment and Training (ACDET)	2
Disability Rights Task Force (DTRF)	1
National Disability Council (NDC)	0
New Deal Task Force (NDTF)	0
Race Employment and Education Forum (REEF)	1
Skills Task Force (STF)	0
	22,062

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to what extent the money contributed by TECs to the national legal fund established under the auspices of the TEC National Council is to be used to contest the distribution of reserves and assets upon the winding up of TECs; and if he will make a statement. [102081]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* We understand the primary purpose of the legal fund is to seek advice on issues common to all TECs/CCTEs, including the extent of the obligations they have under their contracts with Government. This is a reasonable step rather than each TEC seeking separate advice with the additional costs that would entail. However, we would not expect TECs/CCTEs to use public funds to contest the distribution of reserves and assets.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on the application by the WTO of the principle of free trade to purchases by Governments and local authorities of goods and services concerned with education. [101674]

Mr. Caborn: There have not been any such discussions concerning the WTO and Government procurement.

A400M Project

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the proportion of the United Kingdom aerospace industry's projected investment which is accounted for by the A400M airbus military aircraft project. [102392]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department does not produce estimates of future investment in the aerospace sector. As my previous reply on 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 571–72W, explained in relation to the Future Transport Aircraft competition (FTA), we assess the possible impacts of the bids on the UK's industrial and technological capabilities. Since the FTA competition is still at the competitive bidding stage, it would be inappropriate to publish information provided by companies as part of this process.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the Ministry of Defence over the A400M programme. [102741]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Future Transport Aircraft (FTA) competition is being run by the Ministry of Defence. The A400M, along with Boeing's C-17 and Lockheed Martin's C130J, is a contender in the competition. My Department is in regular contact with the Ministry of Defence in the consideration of the industrial implications of this procurement. Our assessment looks at the possible impacts of each bid on the UK's industrial and technological capabilities.

Ghana

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those companies that have received promotional assistance in exporting to Ghana in each of the last five years. [101972]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* British Trade International provides assistance to companies seeking to trade with or invest in Ghana. I shall place in the Library of the House a list of those companies interested in exporting to Ghana over the last five years, who have participated in the formal export promotion schemes now run by British Trade International.

Oftel

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are the projected costs of Oftel for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [102749]

Ms Hewitt: The information is as follows:

£ million

	1999–2000	*2000–01*
Running costs	12.3	11.1
Other capital expenditure	0.3	0.3
Capital	1.2	0.4

"Modern Markets: Confident Customers"

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he plans to take forward the White Paper, "Modern Markets: Confident Customers". [103125]

Dr. Howells: The White Paper contained some 90 initiatives to help people get a good deal. I have today published a detailed implementation plan, giving commitments on timing and naming an official responsible for each. I have placed copies in the Library of the House.

Post Office

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on DTI-DSS co-ordination in relation to the Post Office. [101554]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I maintain a dialogue with our DSS colleagues, and there is regular contact between our officials at working level on matters of mutual interest, including the Post Office.

Electronic Mail

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to extend the privacy protection afforded to the Royal Mail to electronic mail correspondence; and if he will make a statement. [101083]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

Section 1 of the Interception of Communications Act 1985 makes it an offence to intercept a communication in the course of its transmission by post or by means of a public telecommunications system. It therefore provides privacy protection for electronic mail (e-mail) when it is carried on the network of a public telecommunications operator (PTO), but not when it passes over networks which are not operated by a PTO. We recognise the need to extend legal protection to all communications on non-PTO networks. In June 1999, the Home Office published a consultation paper, "Interception of Communications in the UK", which contains the Government's proposals for legislation in this area. I will carry these proposals forward in the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill which was announced in the Queen's Speech.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration and Asylum Appeals

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in how many immigration and asylum appeal hearings in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 his Department did not present its case. [101495]

Mrs. Roche: In 1997–98 the Presenting Officer Unit (POU) piloted new working procedures designed to increase flexibility and productivity which included identifying non-complex cases in which the absence of a Presenting Officer would not affect the outcome of the appeal. A total of 126 appeal cases were heard without a Home Office representative being present. In 1998–99 the Immigration Appellate Authority (IAA) significantly increased its throughput of appeals and by introducing the new working practices the POU was able to target resources with some precision. The IAA was informed in 6,230 cases, 11 per cent. of the total listed for hearing, that there would be no Home Office representative: no information is available as to how many of these cases proceeded to a hearing. In the current financial year the IAA has been informed in 610 cases, 3 per cent. of total listed, that there would be no Home Office representative.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102374]

Mr. Straw: Private secretaries usually take notes of formal meetings between Ministers and people from outside the Home Office. The degree of detail recorded, and the writing up of notes, depends on the nature of the meeting and of the issues raised.

Police Forces (Reorganisation)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each of the police forces in England and Wales, the dates of *(a)* force reorganisation plans and *(b)* new chief officers taking up appointment. [R] [102393]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The organisational structure of each police force is a matter for the chief officer of police.

In relation to police areas of the Metropolitan Police Service, Essex Police, Hertfordshire Constabulary and Surrey Police will change on 1 April 2000 when the boundaries of the Metropolitan Police District are brought into line with those of the 32 London Boroughs. These changes are from section 323 of the Greater London Authority Act. The commencement order has been made which will bring section 323 into effect from 1 April 2000.

The dates of new chief officers who have taken up appointment during 1999 are:

	Date
Dorset Police	10 May 1999
Gwent Police	23 July 1999
Hampshire Constabulary	21 September 1999
West Mercia Constabulary	5 April 1999

St. Kitts

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the entitlement of residents of St. Kitts to British citizenship. [102300]

Mrs. Roche: St. Kitts and Nevis is no longer a British dependent territory. A St Kitts and Nevis child may in certain circumstances have an entitlement to registration as a British citizen, but in most instances a number of years' residence in the United Kingdom is required on the part of the child and/or its parents. Adults may obtain

British citizenship only by naturalisation, which is a discretionary matter rather than an entitlement, generally following some years' residence in the United Kingdom.

Neighbourhood Watch Schemes

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what funding is made available by his Department for help in setting up neighbourhood watch schemes. [102707]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We do not provide funding to set up individual Neighbourhood Watch schemes. We do, however, fund national initiatives such as publicity campaigns and training packs which have played a considerable part in the growth of the movement.

Criminal Justice Act 1988

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the principal conclusions and recommendations of the review of the interpretation of section 133(1) of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 that was concluded in April 1999; and if he will place a copy of that review in the Library. [101709]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This review did not lead to any change of policy or practice. The review was conducted by means of communications between Ministers and officials of various Departments, and legal advice to Ministers. The Code of Practice on Access to Government Information indicates that such internal discussion and advice is exempt from the commitments to provide information in that Code.

DEFENCE

Rapier Mk 2 Missiles

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what was the value of the contract for Rapier Mk 2 surface-to-air missiles that was awarded to Matra BAe Dynamics; [100760]

(2) how many Rapier Mk 2 surface-to-air missiles have been ordered from Matra BAe Dynamics in addition to the original order. [100759]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 15 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the value of the contract for Rapier Mk 2 surface-to-air missiles that was awarded to Matra BAe Dynamics. You also asked how many Rapier Mk 2 surface-to-air missiles have been ordered from Matra BAe Dynamics additional to the original order. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The value of the contract for Rapier Mk 2 surface-to-air missiles that was awarded to Matra BAe Dynamics is around £260M. I am afraid that I am unable to let you know how many missiles have been ordered as it is considered that the release of this information would be harmful to our national security interests and would also be in breach of a third party's commercial confidences. I am therefore withholding this information under Exemptions 1 and 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Naval Projects

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment he has made of the effect of the collapse of the Common New-Generation Frigate programme on future European collaborative naval projects; [100758]

(2) what he estimates the typical cost of the Type-45 destroyer will be. [100751]

Mr. Hoon: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the Hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 15 December 1999:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Type 45 Project. This matter falls to me to answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The total programme cost for the 12 currently planned Type 45 warships including their missiles is approximately £6Bn. This includes approximately £1.2Bn for the development, design and build of the first of class ship and £1Bn for the development and initial production of the Principal Anti Air Missile System (PAAMS). The balance of £3.8Bn contains funding for further missile procurement, allows for the incremental acquisition of the combat system. The ship design will incorporate significant growth margins to allow for this incremental capability development. A typical cost per ship is thus difficult to asses but the average is expected to be within a target cost of about £270M, excluding missiles.

You also asked what assessment had been made of the effect of the collapse of the Common New Generation (CNGF) Programme. The tri-national project office, before it closed on 29 October 1999, provided an assessment of the lessons learned to each of the three partner nations. These reported lessons are being carefully considered and we will be compiling our own UK national lessons learned paper in order to ensure that they are applied appropriately to other collaborative projects. At this stage, I would assess the key lessons to be:

a. The operational requirement should be agreed in detail, and be confirmed as affordable against agreed budgets. This information (on requirement and cost) should be communicated to Industry at an early stage to avoid over-ambitious performance specifications being set at the outset that have subsequently to be adjusted (with consequent delay) as financial realities are brought to bear;

b. early in the programme, a credible industrial organisation must be established which meets the requirements of industry and of all particular governments. For the UK, this means the appointment of an effective prime contractor not a joint venture company;

c. work share arrangements should not be allowed to distort industrial management of the programme. The involvement of trans-national companies and OCCAR are likely to be helpful in ensuring work share issues are resolved efficiently and economically.

Applying these principles proved intractable in the context of HORIZON but was possible with the PAAMS Anti-Air Warfare missile component of the CNGF programme and you will be aware that a Development and Production contract for PAAMS was successfully placed last August on behalf of the three nations. This illustrates that the HORIZON outcome need not inhibit successful collaboration in Europe in future.

Missile Assessment

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the advantages of *(a)* the Meteor missiles made by Matra BAe Dynamics and *(b)* its US rival; and if he will make a statement. [100597]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 15 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary for Defence about the assessments that have been made of the Meteor and US missile options bid into the Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missile (BVRAAM) competition. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

We are currently evaluating the Best and Final Offers we have received in response to the above competition to satisfy the RAF's requirement for a BVRAAM for Eurofighter. The evaluation will take into account a wide range of factors including missile performance, cost, industrial factors and overall value for money and will set out the respective advantages of each option. It remains our intention to announce the outcome of the competition in the new year.

RAID System

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the RAF are participating in the Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing Systems mission. [101659]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There are no RAF Rangeless Airborne Instrumented Debriefing Systems (RAIDS) 'missions' as such involving RAF personnel. However, the RAF has procured eight RAIDS pods and two ground stations and is conducting a trail of their utility. A wider procurement of RAIDS pods is in process. A number of RAF personnel across a number of units and organisations are involved in the trial but none of them is solely assigned to RAIDS.

Family Contact

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provisions have been made to ensure family contact on 25 December 1999, 31 December 1999 and 1 January 2000 for those members of the armed forces who will be separated from their families on those dates. [101728]

Mr. Hoon: We recognise the importance of Service personnel away from home being able to keep in touch, particularly during holiday periods. To this end, all personnel deployed on eligible operations are given 20 minutes worth of free welfare telephone calls home each week. In the past, this facility has been provided using a mix of private and military services, and, whenever operational constraints have allowed, has also been made available to personnel to allow them to make additional telephone calls home at their own expense. All personnel deployed away from home over the Christmas and New Year period will have access to this minimum level of service, either as their primary means of calling home or as a fallback when other systems are not working.

We are currently in the process of deploying a new communication system, called Project WELCOME, which is being introduced to give personnel who are deployed away from home on operations guaranteed access to a welfare telephone, whatever the operational situation. This new system will be fully operational in the Gulf by Christmas and will be introduced into other theatres as soon as the necessary equipment is available and appropriate contractual arrangements can be made.

In addition to this, to cope with the increased demand over the Christmas and New Year, we have:

Purchased eleven additional mobile phones for the Gulf.

Introduced 'electronic blueys' into the Falkland Islands, following a successful trial in the Balkans.

Arranged for the deployment of seven extra satellite phones into Kosovo.

Negotiated with The Sun newspaper, BT and Siemens to provide a video conferencing link which will enable troops to book a 10-minute slot free of charge to link up with their families at home and talk on camera. The service will operate in Kosovo during the period 22 to the 26 of December and in Bosnia during the period 29 December to the 2 of January. It is anticipated that approximately 1,000 troops in each theatre will be able to take advantage of this service.

Agreed with BT to provide all troops serving in isolated locations throughout the Balkans who are having to use the BT satellite phones with a free five minute phone card valid for use on or after the 25 of December.

Agreed with Cable and Wireless that all single and married unaccompanied personnel serving in the Falkland Islands will be given 20 minutes of welfare telephone calls free.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102376]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102737]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Considerable efforts are being made in my Department to increase the proportion of ethnic minority staff we employ from our current level of 1.5 per cent. of the total civilian workforce. Our longer term aim is to reflect the diversity of MOD's recruitment catchment populations in our total civilian workforce. To this end our outreach work includes: establishing links with local racial equality councils and community organisations; targeted advertising; participating in careers fairs aimed principally at the ethnic minorities; sharing experience with like-minded employers through membership of Race for Opportunity; and providing work placements for ethnic minority graduates in association with the Windsor Fellowship. Internally, ethnic minority representation goals have been set and specific recruitment goals are being developed for recruiting areas which take account of relocations and re-organisations, and the representation of the ethnic minorities among the working population in catchment communities. Work is also underway, in conjunction with the Services, to improve the MOD's image as an equal opportunities employer in respect of both civilian staff and Armed Forces personnel.

Reserves

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the categories of reserves, indicating in each

case *(a)* the name of the category, *(b)* the numbers of (i) men and (ii) women in the category, *(c)* the amount of training obligations for the category, *(d)* the number of (i) men and (ii) women who fulfilled that training obligation in the last year, *(e)* the call-out commitment of the category and *(f)* the number of personnel in the category with whom there has been written communication in the last year to confirm (i) addresses and other personal particulars and (ii) continued availability for call-out commitment. [102828]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Air Losses (Kosovo)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many and what type of manned and unmanned aircraft or air vehicles were lost during operations over Kosovo in 1999; and what is their replacement value. [101862]

Mr. Hoon: Over the 78 days of Operation Allied Force, the UK lost 12 Phoenix Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAVs) although only two of these were lost to direct enemy air defence activity. Additionally, one RAF C-130 Hercules was lost outside Yugoslav airspace.

The approximate capital cost of the RAF C-130 aircraft is £15 million at 1998 prices. The original cost of the 12 Phoenix UAVs was in the region of £3.5 million. No final decision has yet been made on whether to replace these UAVs on a like for like basis but, if we were to do so, replacement costs would be subject to negation with the prime contractor.

Nuclear Plant Safety (USA)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the health and safety record of nuclear-related plants managed by Lockheed Martin in the USA; and if they have incurred fines or had plants closed for health and safety reasons by the Department of Energy. [101863]

Mr. Hoon: The health and safety record of a US contractor operating under a US regulatory regime is a matter for the US authorities. I can confirm that the AWE Management Limited consortium, which will operate the Atomic Weapons Establishment from 1 April 2000 and of which Lockheed Martin is a member, will be subject to strict supervision by the Ministry of Defence and close regulation by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate.

Departmental Lost Property

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the items of equipment and furniture and their cost that *(a)* have been stolen and *(b)* are otherwise unaccounted for from his Department and its agencies during the last 12 months, identifying items valued at £5,000 or more, and separately identifying information technology material. [102836]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My Department makes a statement on losses in its annual Appropriation Accounts. The Accounts for financial year 1998–99 will be published shortly. The detailed information requested is, however, not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Army Intelligence Corps

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date the decision was taken to stand down the Research Unit of the Army Intelligence Corps; and if he will make a statement. [101865]

Mr. Spellar: I am withholding this information under Exemption 1a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Military Insignia (Copyright)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions in the past two years legal action has been taken to collect fees levied for use of badges, crests and insignia of Her Majesty's armed forces; and what penalties have been imposed for infringement of Crown copyright in such cases. [101870]

Mr. Spellar: Over the past two years it has not been necessary to initiate legal proceedings in connection with the non-payment of fees for the reproduction of badges, crests and insignia of Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

Defence White Paper

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for publishing a Defence White Paper. [103043]

Mr. Hoon: I will publish a Defence White Paper on Monday 20 December.

CHARM 3

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to make an announcement on the CHARM 3 training ammunition competition; and if he will make a statement. [103042]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am please to announce that, following a competition and subject to the negotiation of satisfactory terms and conditions, we have decided to award a contract to Royal Ordnance for the development and initial production of 120mm training ammunition for the Challenger 2 tank. This is good news for the company and will provide the Army with training ammunition to match Challenger 2's excellent performance and capability.

In addition, discussions between MOD and Royal Ordnance on a possible Partnering Arrangement are progressing very well. We signed a Partnering Principles document on 8 October, which defined our mutual objectives, including the achievement of improved value for money for the MOD as customer, and profitability for the company. Negotiations are continuing and I hope to be able to make an announcement shortly. In the event that an agreement is reached, the intention is that CHARM 3 Training Round would be included within the scope of any such Agreement.

Military Forces (Northern Ireland)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many patrols were carried out by each battalion stationed in Northern Ireland in the last month for which figures are available, broken down by police district and approximate district council constituencies. [101868]

Mr. Spellar: The number of patrols that were carried out by each battalion stationed in Northern Ireland in November 1999, broken down by each police district and approximate district council constituencies are set out in the table:

Battalion	*Police division*	*Approximate district council boundaries*	*Number of patrols*
3 Infantry Brigade			
Armagh Roulement Battalion	H	Armagh, Newry and Mourne	247
East Tyrone Roulement Battalion	K	Cookstown, Dungannon	160
Ballykinler Battalion	G	Down, Ards, Newry and Mourne	12
3rd Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment	J	Craigavon, Lisburn, Banbridge	185
8th Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment	H	Armagh	228
8 Infantry Brigade			
Ballykelly Battalion	N	Limavady, Strabane	12
Londonderry Battalion	N	Londonderry, Strabane	0
Omagh Battalion	L	Omagh, Dungannon, Fermanagh	104
4th Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment	L	Fermanagh	305
5th Royal Irish Regiment	O	Magherafelt, Limavady, Coleraine, Moyle, Larne, Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney	11
39 Infantry Brigade			
Belfast Roulement Battalion	B	Belfast	0
Holywood Battalion	D	North Down, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey	0
7th Royal Irish Regiment	A and E	Belfast, North Down, Castlereagh	0
9th Royal Irish Regiment	D and B	Lisburn, Antrim	0

A patrol is defined as any foot or mobile patrol in support of the RUC regardless of size or duration. Patrols conducted by the Army for local security around bases are not included.

Some battalions operate in more than one Police Division. Police Divisions are not coterminous with District Council boundaries. These delineations are therefore only approximate and in some cases a Council area may be covered by more than one Battalion, e.g. Lisburn.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the overall strength in September *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999 was of military forces in Northern Ireland, broken down into the numbers attached to the (i) RAF, (ii) Royal Navy (iii) RIR, (iv) RIR part-time and (v) others. [101866]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is set out in the table.

	Strength 1998	*Strength 1999*
Army (General Service)	[1]10,873	[2]10,491
Royal Air Force	1,152	1,150
Royal Navy	321	182
The Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service Full Time)	2,627	2,536
The Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service Part Time)	1,961	1,841
Total	16,934	16,200

[1] Includes the Province Reserve Battalion and the Urban Reinforcement Battalion which are fully committed to Northern Ireland although only one company of each was deployed to the Province as at 30 September 1998. Also includes the Rural Reinforcement Battalion which was committed but not deployed at that time.

[2] Includes the three Northern Ireland Reinforcement Battalions (Urban, Rural and Drumadd) which are fully committed to Northern Ireland but as of 17 November 1998 were all rear-based on the Mainland. It also includes the Province Reserve Battalion which is also fully committed to the Province but had only one company in Northern Ireland as at 30 September 1999.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Army regiments currently deployed in Northern Ireland, indicating *(a)* the numbers attached to each and *(b)* the estimated duration of their tour of duty; and if he will make a statement on planned deployment during the next 12 months. [101867]

Mr. Spellar: The British Army General Service Infantry Battalions currently deployed in Northern Ireland are listed in the table, along with their strength and tour length:

Unit	*Strength*	*Length of Tour*
The 1st Battalion the Scots Guards	604	2 years—until April 2000
The 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh Fusiliers	608	2 years—until August 2000
The 1st Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment	595	2 years—until May 2001
The 1st Battalion the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment	639	2 years—until December 2001
The 1st Battalion The Royal Green Jackets	590	2 years—until March 2001
The 1st Battalion the Coldstream Guards	531	6 months—until March 2000
The 1st Battalion the Grenadier Guards	500	6 months—until December 1999
The 1st Battalion the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire	443	6 months—until May 2000

Apart from one company of The 1st Battalion The King's Regiment, the following are fully committed to Northern Ireland under control of the GOC but are not currently deployed to the Province.

Unit	*Strength*	*Length of Tour*
The 1st Battalion the King's Regiment	579	2 years—until April 2001
12 Regiment Royal Artillery	335	6 months—until April 2000
The 2nd Battalion The Light Infantry	335	6 months—until December 1999
7 Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery	425	6 months—until January 2000

Note:
Figures as at 3 December 1999

In addition there are six Home Service Battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment, totalling 4,377 soldiers, comprising both full-time and part-time members, which are wholly committed to service to Northern Ireland, but not shown in the above table.

Details of future deployments to the Province are being withheld under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Royal Irish Regiment patrols were *(a)* accompanied by the RUC and *(b)* unaccompanied in the last month for which figures are available. [101869]

Mr. Spellar: The number of Royal Irish Regiment patrols accompanied by a member of the RUC and those unaccompanied for the month of November 1999 are set out in the table:

Battalion	*Number of patrols*	
	Accompanied by RUC	*Unaccompanied by RUC*
3rd Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	61	124
4th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	305	0
5th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	11	0
7th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	0	0
8th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	73	155
9th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	0	0

A patrol is defined as any foot or mobile patrol in support of the RUC regardless of size of duration. Patrols conducted by the Army for local security around bases are not included.

Ordnance Replacement Costs

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the replacement costs of *(a)* Paveway II, *(b)* Paveway III, *(c)* RBL 755, *(d)* 1000lb bomb, *(e)* Alarm and *(f)* sea-launched cruise missile. [102674]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 30 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 83W.

PRIME MINISTER

Civil Service Modernisation

Dr. Godman: To ask the Prime Minister if he has received the substantive report on progress in modernising the Civil Service which was promised in the "Modernising Government" White Paper; and if he will make a statement. [102987]

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to be able to report that the Head of the Home Civil Service, Sir Richard Wilson, has sent me his report on Civil Service reform.

The world in which the Civil Service operates is changing. Information technology, the media, electronic communications, Europe, modernisation of the constitution, and public demand for higher quality services are all changing fast, and the Civil Service needs to change too.

Sir Richard and his colleagues have set out an excellent and exciting programme, which I fully endorse. It is designed to ensure that the Civil Service is fully equipped to deliver the Modernising Government agenda, and to meet the challenges of the 21st century. A Modernisation Fund of £100 million over two years has been set up to support the programme. Sir Richard and his colleagues will be leading these changes with the full support of the Government and, I hope, the House. I would like to pay tribute to the quality of the Civil Service. I believe that a sign of this quality is the fact that the Service has recognised for itself the need for further improvement and is now driving forward such an ambitious programme of reform. A copy of the Report has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 December. [102584]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I had meetings with Ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

Mid Essex Hospital Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Prime Minister what information the Government have compiled on the degree

of compliance by Mid Essex Hospital Trust with the Government's undertaking that treatment for in-patients will be carried out within 18 months. [101942]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The Government are committed to ensuring that no patient has to wait more than 18 months for treatment. To reinforce this aim Sir Alan Langlands, the National Health Service Chief Executive, has asked NHS trusts to review their waiting lists and to tighten their procedures.

As a result of this work, a number of patients at Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust have been identified as waiting over 18 months for treatment at the end of November 1999.

The figures for November 1999 are not due to be published until the week commencing 10 January 2000. However, Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust, in conjunction with the North Essex Health Authority and the Eastern Regional Office, are taking steps to ensure that patients identified as waiting over 18 months are treated as soon as possible.

HEALTH

Correspondence

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire's letters of 23 August regarding Mrs. G. Hague, and 29 September regarding Mr. P. Hodgson. [102798]

Yvette Cooper: I shall let the hon. Member have a reply to his question as soon as possible.

Disablement Services

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people are waiting for an eligibility assessment for an electronically powered indoor/outdoor wheelchair; [102318]

(2) how many extra contractual referrals took place during their last year of operation in respect of *(a)* orthotics, *(b)* prosthetics and *(c)* wheelchairs; [102316]

(3) how many people who have been assessed as being eligible for an electronically powered indoor/outdoor wheelchair are waiting for one; [102319]

(4) how many out of area treatments have taken place for *(a)* orthotics, *(b)* prosthetics and *(c)* wheelchairs. [102315]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* artificial limbs and *(b)* wheelchairs were issued by the National Health Service in 1997–98. [102320]

Mr. Hutton: The National Health Service issued 1,276 powered indoor/outdoor wheelchairs in 1997–98. Information on how many artificial limbs were issued is not available centrally.

NHS Dentists

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to encourage NHS dentists to keep *(a)* their skills and *(b)* the treatments they offer up to date. [102354]

Mr. Hutton: The General Dental Council has agreed proposals with the dental profession for a 'recertification' scheme whereby dentists would not be allowed to remain registered unless they showed evidence that they were participating in continuing education and training. We support these proposals and are drawing up an order to make the necessary amendments to the Dentists Act 1984 by means of Section 60 of the Health Act 1999.

Abortion

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he received the recent surveys carried out by Voice for Choice on abortion services; and what steps are being taken to ensure that the criteria for obtaining an NHS abortion are standardised throughout England and Wales; [101933]

(2) if he will ensure that health authorities set up a central telephone helpline and booking system for use by women, doctors and other health professionals in line with the Family Planning Association's recommendations following their recent survey on abortion. [101934]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* Officials received a copy of the surveys on 6 December.

It is for local health commissioners to determine the appropriate level of gynaecological provision, including abortion services, in the light of the needs of their local populations. The national sexual health strategy which is currently being developed will look at all aspects of sexual health including access to services.

In addition the White Paper "The new NHS" outlines a number of steps which we will be taking to improve the consistency of service provision throughout the NHS. Health improvement programmes (HImPs) are being drawn up by health authorities in consultation with NHS trusts, primary care groups, primary care professionals, local authorities, the public and other partner organisations such as voluntary organisations. The HImP sets out the strategic direction on improving health and on delivering better health and social care as well as setting out the framework for action on commissioning services.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to give women in Northern Ireland the same rights to abortion as those given to women in England, Scotland and Wales. [101930]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* There are no plans to extend the Abortion Act 1967, as amended, to Northern Ireland.

Secure Accommodation

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many additional places in local authority secure accommodation have been provided since 1 May 1997; and how many he plans to provide. [102766]

Mr. Hutton: At 31 March 1997 there were 346 approved places in local authority secure accommodation in England and Wales. A further 110 places have since been made available. Eight more places will become available next year. Decisions have yet to be taken on the development of secure accommodation beyond this spending period.

NHS Direct

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to receive the further report by Sheffield University into the effectiveness of NHS Direct; and if he will place a copy of the report in the Library. [102776]

Ms Stuart: Sheffield University's second interim report into the effectiveness of NHS Direct is expected early in the New Year. The University's final report is expected in spring 2000. Copies of the reports will be placed in the Library.

Glenthorne Youth Treatment Centre

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the Glenthorne Youth Treatment Centre; and if he will make a statement. [103044]

Mr. Hutton: The Glenthorne Youth Treatment Centre in Birmingham has made an important and valued contribution to the treatment and care of some of the most difficult and disturbed young people with whom the child care system has had to deal, and has been influential in the lives of many young people.

When the Centre opened in 1978, except for St. Charles the other Youth Treatment Centre in Essex, which has since closed, there were no comparable facilities for accommodating and treating such difficult and disturbed young people. Since then, however, local authorities have developed their own secure accommodation and have become skilled and experienced in dealing with many young people needing secure care. The Department of Health has undertaken a major building and refurbishment programme in recent years to strengthen the range and geographical spread of local authority accommodation by providing an additional 170 places for young people. There will be funding in the coming year to continue this programme of upgrading and refurbishment.

From April 2000, the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales will become responsible for commissioning and purchasing places in the secure juvenile estate for remanded and sentenced young people. The Board has decided that it does not wish to use the Glenthorne Centre for this purpose. As up to half the young people accommodated in the Centre at any one time are placed there by the Prison Service it would be extremely difficult to continue to run the Centre as a viable unit without these placements. There are also good child care practice issues to be considered. Because of the growth in experience and provision in the wider child care field, these young people can now be cared for in a number of appropriate locations and need not be labelled as "the worst in the country" by virtue of being placed in only one facility. For these reasons, I therefore intend to consult the staff and their representatives about the future of the unit, including its possible closure. The consultation period will last three months, at the end of which I will make my final decision on the future of the Centre.

Generic Drugs

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he will take to offset the impact of a rise in the price of generic drugs in those health authority areas with a high use of such drugs. [102447]

Ms Stuart: All health authorities should have contingency arrangements in place to manage this and similar financial pressures within their unified budgets.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Billy Gorman and Paddy McKinney

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will place a copy of the judgment of the Court of Appeal on the 1980 conviction of Billy Gorman and Paddy McKinney in the Library. [101871]

Mr. Lock: Copies of the judgment have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Bilateral Concordat (Wales)

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to publish the bilateral concordat between the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales. [103046]

Jane Kennedy: I am pleased to announce that my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and the First Secretary have agreed the text of the Concordat between the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales. Copies of the Concordat have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, and the text is available on the Lord Chancellor's Department website (www.open.gov.uk/lcd-see 'What's New?').

I hope that the Concordat will mark the beginning of a fruitful and co-operative working relationship between the Department and the National Assembly.

Advisory Committee (Eighth Report)

Angela Smith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on legal education and conduct intends to publish its eighth and final annual report. [103045]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct has today published its eighth and final annual report, and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

CABINET OFFICE

Scottish and Welsh Ministers (Briefing Costs)

8. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office from which budgets the costs of briefing Scottish and Welsh Executive Ministers by UK ministries for replying to debates in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly are found. [101550]

Mr. Stringer: Any costs involved in assisting the devolved administrations are borne by the Department concerned.

Modernisation

9. **Dr. David Clark:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what discussions she has had with trade union representatives and others on modernising Government. [101551]

Marjorie Mowlam: I meet the trade unions regularly to discuss Modernising Government, among other topics.

I have recently discussed the modernisation agenda with Sir Jeremy Beecham of the Local Government Association, with members of the senior civil service and with representatives of the business and voluntary sectors.

Social Exclusion

10. **Mrs. Heal:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made in implementing the reports of the social exclusion unit. [101552]

Marjorie Mowlam: All five of the Social Exclusion Unit reports—on rough sleeping, truancy, teenage pregnancy, poor neighbourhoods, and training for 16–18 year olds—are being implemented.

In my new role as Chair of the Ministerial Network on Social Exclusion I will be making sure that the implementation process works, so that we deliver real change on the ground—where it counts.

16. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement about the implementation of policies designed to tackle social exclusion. [101560]

Marjorie Mowlam: We aim to create a fairer society, in the next two decades, in which no child lives in poverty. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has asked me to take on a new role with the Social Exclusion Unit to make sure that joined-up government, particularly for deprived areas and people, is a reality both inside Whitehall and in every part of the country.

Public Bodies

11. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the Government's annual report on non-departmental bodies will be published. [101553]

12. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the Government's annual report on non-departmental bodies will be published. [101555]

Mr. Stringer: "Public Bodies 1999" will be published tomorrow.

The 1999 Executive Non-departmental Public Bodies Report will be published in January 2000 as stated in the Modernising Government Action Plan.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the cases in which powers formerly held by non-departmental public bodies have been transferred to elected bodies since 1 May 1997. [102513]

Mr. Stringer: The Government have transferred around 200 non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) to democratically elected chambers in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the number of *(a)* non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* task forces in England (i) on 1 May 1997, (ii) on 1 May 1998 and (iii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [102486]

Mr. Stringer: Information on the number of non-departmental public bodies in England, and throughout the UK, is published annually in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies are available from the Library of the House. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) on 9 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 634W, for information on the number of task forces.

Better Government for Older People

13. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the progress of the better Government for older people pilot schemes. [101556]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The programme continues to make good progress towards delivering real improvements in older people's experience of public services.

The Bolton pilot, which I visited on 26 November, impressed me with a number of significant achievements: a new day care centre for Asian elders and better access to benefits information via a new touch-screen IT link.

Earlier today, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office discussed with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chairman of the Local Government Association how best to bring other service providers up to the high standards of the pilot projects once the programme's pilot phase comes to an end next year.

23. **Ms Blears:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress is being made in implementing better Government for older people. [101568]

Mr. Stringer: The programme continues to make good progress towards delivering real improvements in older people's experience of public services.

Earlier today, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State discussed with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chairman of the Local Government Association how best to bring other service providers up to the high standards of the pilot projects once the programme's pilot phase comes to an end next year.

Anti-drugs Strategy

14. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress is being made in delivering the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [101557]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) today, column 261.

Special Advisers

15. **Mr. Tyler:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what guidance is given by her office to Special Advisers in Government Departments on the limitations to be observed on their political involvement. [101559]

Marjorie Mowlam: Detailed guidance for Special Advisers on their role and responsibilities is set out in the "Model Contract for Special Advisers". This includes the rules governing the involvement of Special Advisers in political activities.

18. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the number of advisers employed by the Government. [101562]

Marjorie Mowlam: There are 68 Special Advisers serving Cabinet Ministers. In addition, I have appointed Mr. Keith Hellawell as the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator and Mr. Michael Trace as his Deputy. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has appointed Professor Michael Barber as the Standards and Effectiveness Adviser and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has appointed Mr. Chris Wales, Mr. Paul Gregg and Ms Shriti Vadera as members of the Council of Economic Advisers. All are employed on Special Adviser terms.

Rural Affairs

17. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what actions she is taking to ensure inter-departmental co-ordination on rural affairs. [101561]

Marjorie Mowlam: I am chairing the new Cabinet Committee to co-ordinate the Government's policies affecting rural areas.

Inter-departmental Reviews

19. **Mr. Kirkwood:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what proposals she has to enable parliamentary scrutiny of the recently announced inter-departmental reviews. [101564]

Marjorie Mowlam: Interdepartmental reviews can be scrutinised in the normal way by ministerial accountability to Parliament.

Internet

20. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps her Department is taking to make use of the internet in communications between Government and business. [101565]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Cabinet Office is investigating ways of increasing the amount of electronic communication with business, including the use of the Government Procurement Card, e-commerce discussions with major suppliers, and making procurement information available on the Department's website.

Since the autumn of this year the Cabinet Office IT Infrastructure Division has provided access to the internet for all the Department's staff (via the Government Secure Intranet). This makes it possible for the Cabinet Office to communicate effectively with other departments and business and greatly facilitates meeting the Government's target for doing business electronically.

The Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) has established, and manages, a number of procurement schemes under which public sector organisations can purchase a wide range of IT and telecommunications products and services from the private sector using the internet.

Information Champions

21. **Mr. White:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the role of the information champions; and what progress has been made since the committee was set up. [101566]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Information Age Government Champions (IAGC) lead work in support of the Corporate IT Strategy. They take ownership on behalf of departments and agencies and report to Ministers and the Modernising Government Project Board. Members include representatives from departments, the NHS and local government. The IAGC have agreed a programme of work that will result in the publication in March 2000 of the Corporate IT Strategy for government. Further details of the work of the IAGC can be found on their website (http://www.iagchampions.gov.uk).

Regional Initiatives (Funding)

22. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what discussions she has had with those of her Cabinet colleagues responsible for co-ordinating the delivery of economic development funding, European funding and other regional initiatives. [101567]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have no Ministerial responsibility for these policy areas but of course I participate fully in collective discussion of them.

Social Exclusion Unit

24. **Mr. Plaskitt:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on progress made by the Social Exclusion Unit in meeting the Government's target to reduce homelessness. [101569]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Social Exclusion Unit's report on Rough Sleeping sets the target of reducing the number of those who sleep rough by two thirds by 2002. The Rough Sleepers Unit in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is responsible for action to meet this target and they have today published an implementation strategy for England.

Deregulation

25. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many deregulation proposals her Department expects to be introduced in 2000. [101570]

Mr. Stringer: There are about nine proposals under consideration at the moment.

As my hon. Friend will know through his valuable work as Chairman of the Deregulation Committee, I will be introducing legislation in this session of Parliament to remove barriers to wider application of the current deregulation order-making powers. I am confident this will lead to more proposals coming forward for consideration by the Deregulation Committee.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

26. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what measures she is taking to tackle the under-representation of ethnic minorities in the civil service. [101571]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are committed to redressing under-representation and we are actively working to recruit and retain ethnic minorities at all levels in the Civil Service. Some key measures include the appointment of an Outreach Worker to work with ethnic minority university groups to promote careers in the Civil Service, and a Civil Service ethnic minority careers fair which will be held annually.

Meetings

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will include in the Government's Annual report dates of Cabinet meetings held and their duration. [101563]

Marjorie Mowlam: No.

Drugs

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much money has been spent to date on each area of the Government's anti-drugs strategy announced following the comprehensive spending review. [102662]

Mr. Ian McCartney: It is not possible at this stage of the financial year to provide the information in the format requested.

The Comprehensive Expenditure Review 1997–98 estimated drug-related spending across the UK to be in the region of £1.4 billion.

The 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review settlement provided an additional £217 million over three years directed to health, local authorities and criminal justice agencies for targeted anti-drugs activities. The table details allocations.

In addition, in July 1999, the Home Secretary announced the availability of a further £20 million for the development of Arrest Referral Schemes to get drug misusers into treatment.

Breakdown of additional anti-drugs money

£ million

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*Total*
PSS (purchase of community care services) Local Authority	3	5	12.5	20.5
NHS—Health Authorities drug misuse special allocation	12	18	20	50
Comprehensive provision for treatment of problem drug users in prison and effective links between prisons and community	20	20	20	60
Voluntary drug testing in every prison	2	5	5	12
Piloting of Drug Treatment and Testing Orders followed by comprehensive Implementation subject to evaluation	1	20	40	61
Development Funding for Drug Action Teams	1.5	1.5	1.5	4.5
Department of Health prevention work	1	1	1	3
Research	2	2	2	6
Total	—	—	—	217

Civil Servants

Mr. Healey: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many fast track civil servants have been recruited to Government departments since May 1997. [101558]

Marjorie Mowlam: We recruited 766 Civil Servants on to the Fast Stream Development Programme between May 1997 and the end of October this year. 448 of those were recruited to the General Fast Stream and 318 to specialist schemes.

Quangos

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she is taking to ensure wider diversity in appointments to quangos. [101547]

Mr. Stringer: The Government are committed to ensuring that public appointments are open to a wide field of candidates.

My Department co-ordinates the work of other Departments in taking forward their published action plans to achieve equality of opportunity for all.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Imported Chickens

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if *(a)* chicken meat and *(b)* chicken products imported from Thailand and Brazil are produced from animals raised using antibiotics that are banned in the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [100403]

Ms Quin: The details of antibiotics authorised for use in Thailand and Brazil are not currently available. However, like all other third countries that wish to export meat and other animal products to the EU, Thailand and Brazil are required to submit to the European Commission their plans for testing for residues of veterinary medicinal products including antibiotics.

Cattle Incineration

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his policy on direct incineration of over-thirty-month scheme cattle. [100827]

Ms Quin: EU Commission Regulation 716/96 requires that OTMS animals be incinerated, or rendered and destroyed. The Intervention Board (IB), which is

responsible for the administration of the scheme in the UK, looks to maintain a balance between direct carcase incineration and rendering. On the basis of capacity and cost considerations, the IB has determined that rendering should be the primary disposal route for OTMS animals. IB has contracted meat and bone meal incineration capacity to meet its needs for the foreseeable future. Direct carcase incineration will continue to play an important part in the scheme, in particular for casualty animals slaughtered on-farm.

Flood Defence Review

Mr. Green: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the results of the Flood Defence Review. [101448]

Mr. Morley: I assume this question refers to the action which the Government undertook in response to the 1998 Agriculture Select Committee Report on Flood and Coastal Defence, in particular the review of flood defence funding mechanisms. That review is continuing. A consultation exercise took place earlier this year and the comments received are currently being considered and an announcement on the conclusions will be made in due course.

The Government continue to review progress on implementation of the Environment Agency's Action Plan for implementing the Independent Report on the Easter 1998 Floods, and have published the Agency's quarterly progress reports, most recently on 11 November 1999. Interim High Level Targets for flood and coastal defence operating authorities were published in May. These have been superseded by more comprehensive targets, published on 19 November, which will take effect from 1 April 2000.

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people within his Department. [101668]

Mr. Morley: 6.8 per cent. of staff in core MAFF have declared that they consider they have a disability which falls within the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The percentage is 6.0 per cent. when Agency staff are included.

We encourage the employment of people with disabilities by including equal opportunities statements in all job advertisements and providing reasonable adjustments at interview and during employment. For most clerical posts and equivalents we offer selection tests for people with disabilities who do not have the required academic qualifications. We employ people under the Employment Service's Supported Employment Scheme and provide mechanisms for helping staff with disabilities to adjust to any changes in their situation. We also have an ongoing programme of building works to improve access for people with disabilities.

Fisheries

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if Financial Instruments Fisheries Guidance grants received by *(a)* the Scottish fishing fleet and *(b)* the England fishing fleet will be mainly funded by the United Kingdom under the Fontainebleau arrangement. [102177]

Mr. Morley: Final decisions have not yet been taken on what Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG) grants will be available to either the Scottish or English fishing fleet for the period 2000–06, but any introduced would be mainly funded by the United Kingdom taxpayer. Under the Fontainebleau arrangement it effectively costs the UK taxpayer around 71p for every £1 of EU money spent int he UK.

FIFG grants are also dependent on a minimum level of additional national grant which would be wholly funded by the United Kingdom taxpayer. The proportion of the total grant of this national element would vary depending on the type of work aided and whether or not it is in an Objective 1 area.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much his Department has spent on fisheries in each of the past five years; and what is his estimate of spending on fisheries in each of the next three years. [102397]

Mr. Morley: Grant in aid paid by the Department of the Environment to the National Rivers Authority, the Environment Agency's predecessor, for salmon and freshwater fisheries work was as follows:

	£ million
1994–95	[1]11.1
1995–96	[1]9.7

[1] England and Wales

Details of grant in aid paid by MAFF to the Environment Agency are as follows:

	£ million
1996–97	[1]7.5
1997–98	[1]7.4
1998–99	[2]22.1
1999–2000	[3]4.8
2000–01	[3]4.8
2001–02	[3]3.3

[1] England and Wales.

[2] In 1998–99 there was a temporary change in the rules whereby all revenue from licence fees was returned to Treasury but with an equivalent increase in grant in aid. The underlying figure for MAFF grant in aid is £7.9 million, which included a one-off additional payment of £0.5 million to assist the enforcement of the salmon conservation byelaws.

[3] England only.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions regarding the impact on the Environment Agency of cuts in the fisheries budget. [102398]

Mr. Morley: I have not discussed this matter with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions but I have done so with the Chairman of the Environment Agency.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of reduction in grant-in-aid on the Environment Agency's capacity to carry out its functions with regard to fishing in the North West Region. [102395]

Mr. Morley: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 27 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 922W.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102338]

Mr. Morley: This information is not held centrally and with around 200 properties on the MAFF estate, gathering the information would involve disproportionate cost.

We have the following figures for 19 of our major sites (including London HQ offices, HQ offices in York and Guildford and our Regional Service Centres):

Rooms set aside for:	*Number*
(a) Ethnic minority religious use	0
(b) Pregnant and nursing mothers	6
(c) Smoking	28

Some of our larger sites have more than one building, which accounts for there being more smoking rooms than sites.

Most of the Department's sites have first-aid rooms and/or meeting rooms. These areas are flexible and are made available to meet any reasonable requests from staff, including religious use and needs of pregnant and nursing mothers.

Early Retirement (Farmers)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his reasons for deciding not to pursue an early retirement scheme for farmers; and if he will estimate the projected cost of such a scheme. [102799]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* In reaching a decision not to run an early retirement scheme, account has been taken of the results of consultation, an economic appraisal, and the scope for restructuring provided by other instruments under the Rural Development Regulation and elsewhere. The consultation showed that views were mixed on the benefits of a scheme. While it could contribute to restructuring, the cost would outweigh that benefit. A scheme would also be very complex and costly to administer and would be very difficult to target only to those most in need.

The cost of a scheme would depend entirely on the rates paid—which are laid down in the Rural Development Regulation—and on the targets set.

Religious Slaughter

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will assess the extent to which meat from religious slaughter is sold to the general public without being labelled as such. [102259]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* Figures on meat production do not separately distinguish meat produced from the religious slaughter of animals.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he intends to make it his policy to ensure that all meat from religiously slaughtered animals is labelled as such; and if he will make a statement. [102256]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* We have no plans to do so.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 16 December 1999

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Astra Commission Payments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make available *(a)* to the Trade and Industry Committee and *(b)* to the Plaintiff before the JDS Tribunal in the case of Gerald James file bundles 120 and 121 in respect of Astra Commission payments. [101460]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Any request for information received from the Trade and Industry Committee would be carefully considered. I understand that the proceedings before the JDS Tribunal in the case of Gerald James were concluded on 8 December 1999.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102362]

Mr. Byers: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Plutonium Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what consultations he has had with British Nuclear Fuels plc concerning the quality control procedures covering MOX plutonium fuel manufactured at Sellafield for export to Japan; and what representations his Department has received from *(a)* Japanese customer companies and *(b)* the Japanese Government in respect of the monitoring of MOX fuel; [102176]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of the reports provided to his Department in the past year by BNFL concerning safety and quality assurance of MOX plutonium fuel. [102180]

Mrs. Liddell: Ministers were concerned to learn of falsified quality control data at BNFL's Sellafield MOX Demonstration Facility. The Government have insisted that the company co-operate fully with investigations both by the Japanese customer and regulator and by the HSE's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate.

No representations have been received by my Department from BNFL's Japanese customers. Inquiries from the Japanese Embassy about the data falsification were referred by my Department to HSE (NII) with a request to respond direct. With HSE's agreement, I am placing a copy of their reply to the Embassy in the Library of the House.

On 1 December I discussed with the BNFL Chairman, Mr. Hugh Collum, the progress of the investigations being undertaken and the company's strategy for dealing with management issues identified. Remedial measures are in hand to satisfy both HSE (NII) and BNFL's Japanese customers. I have asked the company to make these public as soon as it has satisfied HSE (NII) as to the adequacy of its proposals.

Copyright

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the effects of the proposed EU Directive on the harmonisation of certain aspects of copyright and related rights in the information society on *(a)* library and archive services, *(b)* UK library and archive privileges and their extension to digital copying, *(c)* lawful copying and use of libraries and archives and *(d)* music reproduction; and if he will make a statement on the inclusion in the proposed EU Directive of the exhaustive list of exceptions to the restricted acts. [102542]

Dr. Howells: While we do not think that the effects of the draft Directive would be particularly problematic in the case of archival operations, we are concerned about its potential impact on library services and privileges. Our concerns stem chiefly from the exhaustive list of exceptions, which we have always felt is unnecessarily prescriptive and inflexible, and have been increased by European Parliament amendments, largely accepted by the Commission, which seek to restrict further the exception provisions. In particular, these amendments make photocopying and research exceptions in the Directive subject to "fair compensation" for right owners, exclude printed music from the photocopying exception, and limit the only specific library exception to copying for conservation purposes.

Overall, our aim is to ensure that it remains possible to achieve a fair and reasonable balance between the interests of right owners and those of users, such as in the library and archive sectors, and we are therefore pressing strongly for much greater flexibility in the exception provisions. Negotiations on the Directive are still some way from conclusion, and we hope that it will prove possible to obtain improvements, particularly since several other member states share many of our concerns about the approach on exceptions. Moreover, we are aware of the potential conflict between exceptions and the use of technical protection measures by right owners, and, like other member states, are seeking to achieve an appropriate balance in this area also.

Competition Commission

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are the projected costs of the Competition Commission for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [102751]

Dr. Howells: Forecast net expenditure for the Competition Commission for these financial years is as follows:

(a) 1999–2000: £8.3 million

(b) 2000–2001: £9.0 million.

Postal Services Commission

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are the projected costs of the Postal Services Commission for the year 2000–01. [102754]

Mr. Alan Johnson: We anticipate that the costs of the Postal Services Commission (PSC) for the year 2000–01 will be in the region of between £2 million and £4 million.

Aircraft Projects

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to make a decision regarding suppliers of the A3XX and A400m projects; and if he will make a statement. [102523]

Mr. Alan Johnson: *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* Airbus has been a major success story of European co-operation, and it is important that the UK continues to be involved in it. British companies benefit from the success of Airbus programmes, not only by supplying to BAE SYSTEMS, the UK partner in Airbus, but also to the French, German and Spanish partners. Procurement choices are the commercial decisions of those companies. Over 400 UK sub-contractors and suppliers are currently working on Airbus programmes.

BAE SYSTEMS has applied for launch investment. In assessing this application, we have looked at the potential benefits for the UK economy as a whole to be secured by this programme. It represents the sort of high-tech knowledge based manufacturing which the Government are keen to encourage. This high level of innovation and technology has benefits which cascade throughout the supply chain.

The Future Transport Aircraft competition is being organised by the Ministry of Defence. However, I am well aware of the industrial significance of this project to BAE SYSTEMS and the UK supply chain. My Department has liaised closely with MOD on this, and the decision (expected in the New Year) will properly take account of industrial factors.

Telephone Pornography

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to monitor and control the use of telephone pornography services offered by telecommunications providers. [102838]

Ms Hewitt: Telephone pornography services are offered using the Premium Rate Service (PRS) charging mechanism. The Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS) has responsibility for regulating PRS, through its Code of Practice. ICSTIS can apply sanctions, ranging from fines to disconnection and barring from service provision, to service providers which breach the Code. ICSTIS and the Office of Telecommunications (Oftel) are currently reviewing the regulatory framework for PRS to ensure that consumers continue to benefit from the right level of protection.

The ICSTIS Code requires all providers of services to abide by a number of provisions covering decency, and requires that promotional material does not reach those for whom the service concerned may be inappropriate.

Gas-fired Power Station, Avonmouth

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on Scottish and Southern Energy's proposal to build a new gas-fired power station at Britannia Zinc Ltd., Avonmouth. [103464]

Mrs. Liddell: I have decided not to grant consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to Scottish and Southern Energy plc for a 100 MW combined cycle gas turbine generating station at Britannia Zinc Ltd., Avonmouth. The application will be put on hold unless an interested party satisfies the Secretary of State that it should be determined at this stage.

This decision has been taken in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled, "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071). I would be prepared to review the decision, if requested, when the stricter consents policy announced in the White Paper is relaxed.

This is the 15th application, totalling over 5,800 MW of new gas-fired generating capacity, which has not been approved since the White Paper was published in October 1998. That would be enough electricity to supply approximately all the households in Greater London or the whole of Scotland.

Copies of the Press Notice and decision letter are being placed in the Library of the House.

Cashmere Exports

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the instruction he gave earlier this year to the Export Credits Guarantee Department to establish a bond guarantee scheme for cashmere exports to the US. [103465]

Mr. Byers: In March of this year, the dispute between the EU and the US over the EU's banana regime led to the US requiring the posting of bonds in respect of potential additional customs duties for certain categories of EU goods, including cashmere knitwear, pending the decision of the WTO arbitrator. Given the potentially devastating effect this could have had on the UK cashmere industry, the Government decided to establish a limited scheme, to be administrated by the Export Credits Guarantee Department, to indemnify cashmere exporters against losses arising from these bonds and additional customs duties.

ECGD's Accounting Officer advised me that, in his judgment, the risk involved in giving such guarantees under Section I(1) of the Export and Investment Guarantees Act 1991, could not be accepted under ECGD's normal underwriting criteria.

However, in view of the importance which Ministers attached to ensuring the future of the UK cashmere industry, I instructed him to make such guarantees available.

Cashmere was subsequently removed from the list of affected goods and I can now report that the scheme has been closed down and that ECGD has not been and will not be required to pay any claims.

Export Controls

Mr. O'Neill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Government are in a position to respond to the recommendation by the Trade and Industry Committee in its Second report of Session 1998–99 on Strategic Export Controls (HC 65) that, prior to the passage of new legislation, consideration be given to laying any new orders made under the Import, Export and Customs Powers (Defence) Act 1939 before the House. [103547]

Mr. Byers: We have considered the Committee's recommendation on this matter and concluded that, pending the introduction of new primary legislation which will provide for parliamentary scrutiny of secondary legislation on strategic export controls, as proposed in the Strategic Export Controls White Paper, any further Orders made under the Import, Export and Customs Powers (Defence) Act 1939 will be laid before both Houses of Parliament.

Combined Heat and Power Station, Hythe

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on the proposal by Scottish Power Plc to build a combined heat and power station at Hythe, Hampshire. [103561]

Mrs. Liddell: I have today given clearance under Section 14 of the Energy Act 1976 to EniChem UK Ltd. and Scottish Power plc's notification to build a 45 MW gas-fired combined heat and power station at the EniChem works, Hythe. The decision has been taken in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071).

Copies of the Press Notice and the clearance letter are being placed in the Library of the House.

Equal Pay

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to amend the law on equal pay. [102724]

Ms Hodge: I have been asked to reply.

We are tackling the gender pay gap through a range of action, including encouraging less gender stereotyping in subject choices and career choices at work. We will ensure the right legislative framework is in place which complies with our European obligations, and we will consult on changes to Tribunal procedures to speed up and simplify equal pay claims.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the number of workers being paid less than the national minimum wage. [102723]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Crausby, dated 16 december 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question about the number of workers being paid under the national minimum wage.

Definitive estimates on the number of people that are being paid under the national minimum wage are not yet available. Currently available estimates for assessing the number take data from both the New Earnings Survey and the Labour Force Survey and adjust them for known limitations in each. However, the latest adjusted estimates are based on data for the spring (March-May) 1999 Labour Force Survey and this period spans the introduction date for the national minimum wage legislation. As a result, the adjusted estimates may be giving a misleading picture of the effect of the minimum wage legislation since employees might legitimately have been earning below the minimum wage rates in March 1999.

The currently available estimates were published in an ONS First Release on 14 October and show that the number of people earning below the minimum wage rates fell significantly between 1998 and 1999. A copy of this first release will be available in the House of Commons Library.

Ofgem

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are the projected costs of Ofgem for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [R] [102756]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

This information is contained in a consultation document recently published by Ofgem, "Office of Gas and Electricity Markets Plan and Budget, April 2000-March 2001", copies of which are available in the Library. Financial Decisions on Ofgem's budget for 2000–01 have not yet been taken.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Deaths

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of road accident deaths in each of the last 10 years involved *(a)* excess alcohol, *(b)* drugs and *(c)* both. [100043]

Mr. Hill: The percentage of persons killed in accidents where one driver or rider involved was over the legal alcohol limit in each of the last ten years was as follows:

	Percentage
1989	15
1990	15
1991	14
1992	16
1993	14
1994	15
1995	15
1996	16
1997	15
1998	13

Statistics are not available for road accident deaths involving drugs or both alcohol and drugs. The Department has recently completed a three-year sample survey of the incidence of drugs in road accident fatalities

for which interim results were released in February 1998. These showed that 6 per cent. of all road users (including drivers, riders, passengers, pedestrians and cyclists) had measurable traces of medicinal drugs and 16 per cent. had traces of illicit drugs (mainly cannabis). The results also showed that 19 per cent. of the sample of drivers and riders killed had taken illicit drugs and consumed alcohol over the legal limit. A full report on the research will be available next year.

The presence of drugs in an accident victim is not evidence of accident causation, although there may be an association. The picture is further complicated by cannabis, because traces can remain in the body for four weeks or more after use, long after it has ceased to have any effect.

Local Speed Limits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend the guidance given in Circular 1/93 from his Department to local highway authorities about local speed limits; and if he will make a statement. [98729]

Mr. Hill: It is likely that the speed review that is due to report shortly will result in some changes to that guidance.

Sexual Abuse Victims (Compensation)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance his Department issues to local authorities regarding compensation payments to victims of sexual abuse. [100238]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There is no specific guidance issued to local authorities on this issue.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the number of station closures on each line of the London Underground from 1995 to 1999 and the projected station closures over the next 12 months, indicating the reason for closure in each instance. [100947]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* This is an operational matter for London Underground. I understand that the detailed information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost as it would include:

Closures as a result of operational issues (within or outside London Underground's control).

Weekend engineering work.

However, the following table summarises past and future major planned station closures:

Duration	*Line*	*Station(s)*	*Reason*
Since 1995	Central	Ongar and North Weald	Insufficient use to warrant remaining open
Since 1995	Piccadilly	Aldwych	Insufficient use to warrant remaining open
1995-April 1998	Northern	Mornington Crescent	Lift replacement
1995–98	East London	Shoreditch, Wapping, Rotherhithe, Surrey Quays, New Cross and new Cross Gate	Work to upgrade the line, improve the signalling and Thames tunnel
Early July-late October 1996	Northern	London Bridge, Borough and Kennington	Work on tunnel segments
November 1996-July 1997	Bakerloo	Lambeth North	Tunnel strengthening under the Thames
21–30 October 1999	Bakerloo	Queens Park to Harrow and Wealdstone	Track replacement (Railtrack work on Silverlink tracks that are shared with the Underground)
Spring 2000	Bakerloo	Edgware Road	Lift replacement
April 2000 (15 April-1 May)	Victoria	Pimlico, Vauxhall and Brixton	Track works to replace life-expired cross-over at Brixton

The future closures are still provisional and subject to further planning and more detailed consideration. Major works which have only resulted in partial station closures or service disruption have been excluded.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many escalators are not in use at London Underground stations, indicating the stations affected and the length of time escalators have not been in use. [101602]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for London Underground. However, I understand that at 14 December 1999, 35 escalators out of 381 were out of service[1,2].

These are as follows:

Date went out of service	*Station*
13 July 1999	Baker Street
5 November 1999	Bethnal Green
2 December 1999	Bethnal Green
24 September 1999	Camden Town
28 May 1999	Chancery Lane
23 June 1999	Charing Cross
3 October 1999	Clapham North
24 November 1999	Clapham South
30 November 1999	Heathrow Airport
28 May 1997	Holborn
2 November 1999	Holborn
3 June 1999	Hyde Park
19 November 1999	London Bridge
29 March 1999	Manor House
26 November 1999	Manor House
1 September 1999	Notting Hill Gate
6 October 1999	Notting Hill Gate
19 June 1999	Old Street
24 September 1999	Old Street
3 May 1999	Oxford Circus
12 August 1999	Oxford Circus
24 November 1999	Piccadilly Circus
24 September 1999	Shepherds Bush

Date went out of service	*Station*
26 September 1999	South Wimbledon
2 October 1999	South Wimbledon
2 August 1999	St. Johns Wood
21 June 1999	Tottenham Hale
22 September 1999	Waterloo
30 September 1999	Waterloo
30 October 1999	Waterloo
30 October 1999	Waterloo
16 November 1999	Waterloo
16 November 1999	West Ham
1 December 1999	Wood Green

London Underground have implemented a new programme of expenditure on escalator maintenance and repair of more than £100 million over the years 1998–99 to 2000–01 (1998–99 £26 million, 1999–2000 £44.8 million, 2000–01 £66.1 million).

In most cases where an escalator is out of order there will be a parallel escalator which is in operation to minimise passenger inconvenience and disruption. This enables stations to remain open while the works are in progress, and at all times safety is the priority.

[1] There are six escalators out of service at the east end of Canary Wharf Station that will not be utilised until there is sufficient passenger demand.

[2] There are five "redundant" escalators at Charing Cross Station that lead to the former Jubilee Line platforms that are no longer in use following the closure of these platforms.

Driving Licence

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to raise the minimum age for holding a driving licence. [101353]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The training and testing of young and newly qualified car drivers is one of the issues being addressed in the Government's review of road safety strategy. The Government have considered a range of measures which might contribute to improving driving standards and road safety. The Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee recently suggested a minimum period of learning before a car driving test may be taken, and others have suggested changes in the minimum driving age for provisional and/or full licences. However, the Government have not yet reached a conclusion on these matters. We intend to have completed work on a new Road Safety Strategy early in the new year.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102378]

Mr. Prescott: Decisions on the format of minutes will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for each of the buildings under his Department's control, how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102442]

Mr. Prescott: My Department does not keep a breakdown by building. Our policy is to make rooms available on request for religious use and pregnant and nursing mothers. The latest information is that we have 102 rooms dedicated for use by smokers.

Public Transport Gender Audit

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the gender audit of public transport commissioned by his Department. [102479]

Mr. Hill: The gender audit will be used to assist transport planners and operators to develop and implement transport plans and systems that meet women's transport requirements and encourage sustainable development. We are hoping to publish the audit in early 2000.

Uniform Business Rate

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 277W, on the uniform business rate, when he expects information on the projected yield of the uniform business rate in England for 2000–01 to be available. [102812]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information on each individual local authority's projected yield from uniform business rates in 2000–01 will be available by the end of March 2000.

Transport Safety (Sleep-related Incidents)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will establish a research group to provide advice on sleep-related incidents across the transport modes. [102506]

(2) what assessment he has made of the number of road crashes in which sleep is a contributory factor; and if he will make a statement; [102503]

(3) what advice he plans to issue to drivers to reduce the incidence of sleep-related road crashes; [102505]

(4) what research his Department is undertaking into sleep-related road crashes; [102504]

Mr. Hill: The Department began a major research programme on fatigue in December 1992, conducted at Loughborough University. The first phase included a comprehensive study of HGV and car drivers. The results suggested that, for car drivers in particular, tiredness is a principal factor in around 10 per cent. of accidents.

The next phase of the research looked at the relative effectiveness of possible counter measures to tiredness, to ensure that drivers have the best possible advice on how to minimise the risk of a sleep-related accident. Recommendations derived from this work have since been incorporated into the Highway Code.

Much of the research undertaken in the road safety area has relevance in rail, air and maritime situations and vice versa. It is also significant that leading experts in this field are very aware of each other's work. A further phase of the Department's research, begun in September, is reviewing successful measures that have been employed elsewhere in the world and in different operating environments. This includes a requirement to develop a targeted programme of publicity and education to counter driver fatigue. When this is completed in September 2000, the Government will consider what action to take, including whether to commission further research.

Asda Stores Ltd.

Sir David Madel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce his decision on calling in the application for his determination and examination by a public inquiry in respect of the planning application by Asda Stores Ltd. for the redevelopment of the Queensway Hall site in Dunstable town centre; and if he will make a statement. [101981]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* We are still considering whether call-in of this application would be appropriate. I will ensure that the decision is made within the next two weeks. In reaching our decision we will have regard to the Government's policy on call-in, set out in the answer given by my right hon. Friend the then Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning on 16 June 1999, *Official Report,* column 138W.

Rail Regulator

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the projected costs for the Rail Regulator for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [102752]

Mr. Hill: I am advised by the Office of the Rail Regulator that the latest estimated outturn of the cost of running the office for 1999–2000 is £10 million. Provision for 2000–01 was set at £9 million in last year's Comprehensive Spending Review. All expenditure by the Office is offset by licence fees recovered in accordance with the Railways Act 1993.

Ofwat

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the budgeted costs of Ofwat for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [102746]

Mr. Mullin: The Office of Water Services (Ofwat) is a non-Ministerial Government Department statutorily independent of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It is financed by Parliament through licence fees received from the regulated water and sewerage companies.

Ofwat's expenditure profile for the years 1993–94 to 2001–02 is given in figure 22.a of the DETR Departmental Annual Report 1999, Cm 4204. Planned expenditure for 1999–2000 is £11.9 million. Planned expenditure in 2000–01 is £12.7 million.

Hackney Carriages

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many drivers of Hackney carriages in Greater London have had their licences revoked in each of the last five years. [102451]

Mr. Hill: The number of licensed taxi drivers in London (Metropolitan Police District) who have had their licences revoked[1] over the last five years is as follows:

	Total number of revocations
1994	35
1995	34
1996	41
1997	25
1998	54
1999 (January-November)	23

[1] The figures shown are for the initial decisions by the Licensing Authority, some of which were subsequently reduced to a period of suspension or set aside following:

(a) reconsideration of the original decision at a personal hearing; and/or

(b) an appeal to Horseferry Road Magistrates Court, under section 17 of the Transport Act 1985.

Millennium Dome (Public Transport)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what public transport will be operational between Central London and the Millennium Dome on *(a)* 31 December and *(b)* 1 January. [102801]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* There will be no public transport to the Dome on 31 December. For security reasons there will be a traffic exclusion area around the Dome (which will not be open to the public). Bus routes will be subject to local diversions and North Greenwich station will also be closed to the public.

The first public viewing of the Millennium Experience opens at noon on 1 January to a limited audience of 20,000 people. North Greenwich station re-opens at 09:00 on 1 January, from which time a Sunday service of approximately one train every 6–12 minutes will operate on the Jubilee Line. The 188 bus service, which operates between Russell Square and North Greenwich station, recommences with a Sunday service from 10:00. Normal Sunday services will recommence on rail lines from central London from 11:00, at which time the two new Millennium Transit bus services will also commence operation between Charlton and Greenwich rail stations and the Dome.

Waste Management Licences

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the surrender policy for waste management licences issues by the Environment Agency has been launched; and if it is his policy that licence holders who are waiting to surrender their licences having ceased trading should be required to continue paying for operating licences while the agency considers its surrender policy. [102980]

Mr. Mullin: The Environment Agency wrote to licence holders to provide advance notice of the launch of its surrender policy on 1 October 1999. The Agency's letter explained that, after staff training to ensure consistent implementation, the policy would be used from 1 January 2000 to determine surrender applications. Licence holders have a legal obligation to pay subsistence charges while a licence remains in force.

Peat Conservation

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the Government's target is for increasing the percentage of the total market for soil improvers and growing media supplied by non-peat material. [103021]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A target was set in MPG13 "Guidelines for Peat Provision in England" of 40 per cent. of the total market requirements for soil improvers and growing media to be supplied by non-peat materials by 2005.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his Department's policy is on the purchase and use of peat for its own operations and activities; and what performance target his Department has set to reduce current peat use. [103024]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' policy on all slow renewables such as peat is to substitute them with organic waste such as compost, manure, leaf mould, bark chipping and coir. This policy is included in the DETR Greening Operations Policy Statement.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of the total market for soil improvers and growing media was supplied by non-peat material in 1998. [103022]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Non-peat materials accounted for 32 per cent. of the total market in 1998.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the recent report of his Department's peat working group. [103025]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Three copies were placed in the Library on 1 December 1999.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government are on track in meeting their target for increasing the amount of non-peat material sold as soil improvers and growing media. [103023]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There has been a slow but steady increase in the proportion of non-peat material used as soil improvers and growing media. In 1993, 28 per cent. of the total market was met by non-peat materials. This increased to 29 per cent. in 1997 and 32 per cent. in 1998. The report of the Working Group on Peat Extraction and Related Matters published last month identified short-term measures which could be taken to increase the rate of uptake of non-peat materials. If the producers and retailers of growing media respond in the matters of labelling, dilution and developing performance standards for peat and alternatives, I am confident we have a good chance of meeting this target.

Correspondence

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when Mr. Peter Parkman, Chelmsford Borough Council Enforcement Officer, will receive a reply to his letter of 24 September to Peter Alsop of the Transport Commissioner's Office, Cambridge, concerning regulations governing small buses. [102867]

Mr. Hill: A substantive reply was sent to Mr. Parkman on 30 September. A further letter dealing with the one outstanding point has now been sent.

Local Authorities (Best Value Initiative)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the rights of appeal for local people who consider that their ideas of best value are being ignored by their local authority. [103027]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Local Government Act 1999 places best value authorities under a statutory duty to consult with local people as to how the duty of best value can be met after 1 April 2000. This is reinforced by a requirement to consult with business and other interests in considering alternative ways of providing services.

There is no explicit right of appeal, as the Government take the view that where there are conflicting views it is for best-value authorities to judge how the duty is to be met in the light of all the relevant circumstances. They will be expected to provide a clear rationale for the decisions which they reach, and to justify these to local people every year in their Best Value Performance Plans and to independent auditors and inspectors acting on behalf of local people. All local authorities are ultimately accountable to local people through the ballot box.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has issued to local authorities about determining best value in relation to letting contracts for services. [102996]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Guidance to best-value authorities was published by my Department on 14 December (DETR Circular 10/99). This makes clear that authorities should establish a clear policy on the evaluation and assessment of alternative ways of delivering high-quality services at acceptable costs.

Waste Recycling

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which district councils in Wiltshire have met his target for recycling *(a)* domestic and *(b)* industrial waste. [102871]

Mr. Mullin: *(a)* There is no recycling target which each individual local authority is expected to meet. There is a national goal to recycle or compost 25 per cent. of household waste as soon as possible, hopefully by 2005. By 2010 we hope to see 30 per cent. of household waste

being recycled or composted, and in the longer term we hope to see a third of all household waste being dealt with in this way.

Under our Best Value Initiative, performance indicators are being developed for local authority waste services. From these, authorities will be expected to derive targets for their own performance on waste, having regard to any national goals we set in the forthcoming National Waste Strategy. I emphasise, though, that local targets should take account of local assessments of the Best Practicable Environmental Option, and will not therefore necessarily be at the same level as our national goals. I fully expect some authorities to put forward targets that exceed those that we propose, and others to put forward lower targets.

(b) We have no targets for the recycling of industrial waste by local authorities. Although the Environmental Protection Act 1990 gives local authorities the discretion to collect industrial waste, they are under no obligation to do so and few do.

Secure Stations Scheme (Wiltshire)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria must be met to achieve Secure Station status; and which stations in Wiltshire have been awarded such status. [102874]

Mr. Hill: The Secure Stations Scheme is designed to improve and standardise good security practices at all overground and underground stations. To become an accredited Secure Station, each station operator needs to work with their local British Transport Police Crime Prevention Operator to ensure that their station meets the national standards on design and management to cut down crime. Operators also have to conduct an independent passenger survey to see whether passengers feel safe at the station and provide evidence that crime rates are low.

No stations in Wiltshire have yet achieved Secure Stations status.

Local Authority Housing

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he intends to give local housing authorities on preparing business plans for their housing stock as part of the Government's new financial framework for local authority housing. [103347]

Mr. Raynsford: As part of our plans to introduce resource accounting to local authority housing finance, I have today published for consultation draft guidance for local housing authorities on preparing business plans.

The new financial framework will help authorities to take a more businesslike approach to the management of their housing stock, and business plans are a key part of the framework. The draft guidance and the associated models show how authorities can identify and assess alternative strategies for managing, maintaining and investing in their housing assets. I hope that authorities will take the opportunity to comment on the draft guidance and will look constructively at how it can be used to make the best use for current and future tenants of their housing assets.

Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he proposes to announce the outcome of the consultation on proposals to tackle overhanging debt arising from a housing transfer. [103348]

Mr. Raynsford: I am announcing today the outcome of the consultation on how we propose to tackle overhanging debt which arises when the capital receipt from a housing transfer is less than the attributable housing debt.

A consultation paper issued by the Department in August set out four alternative approaches to helping authorities deal with the overhanging debt: continuing to pay subsidy, through either the Housing Revenue Account or Revenue Support Grant subsidy schemes; providing a one-off payment to assist with the repayment of the debt; and transferring the debt to the acquiring landlord. The consultation paper made clear that the Government's preference was for the one-off payment option.

The majority of the responses supported our proposals to provide assistance to the local authority to repay its housing debt. We propose to implement this option.

I have placed in the Libraries of the House and the Vote Office copies of a guidance note setting out the detailed arrangements.

Local Transport Infrastructure

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will announce the allocation of capital resources for expenditure on local transport infrastructure in 2000–01. [103349]

Mr. Hill: This is the second year of the three-year £2.4 billion package for local transport under the Comprehensive Spending Review, including £700 million of additional expenditure.

The total allocation for 2000–01 will be £754.9 million, which will provide for major improvements to local transport infrastructure.

Schemes approved or provisionally approved include innovative proposals for integrating public transport, providing greater travel choice; new bypasses to take through traffic away from local communities, improving their quality of life.

We have also made provision of £301 million for highway maintenance—up 24 per cent. on this year's figure and in line with our commitment to reverse previous cuts in this area. In addition, we have increased general allocation for public transport, minor road improvements, walking, cycling and safety schemes.

In addition, we are providing an extra £18 million for local authorities to improve public transport ahead of the introduction of congestion charging or workplace parking schemes.

Local Transport Plans replace the Transport Policies and Programmes regime, and are the cornerstone of our integrated transport policy. They provide for a longer-term, more strategic approach and greater certainty of funding for Local Authorities.

Copies of the Press Notice, containing a full analysis of the settlement, have been placed in the Library of the House. They have also been placed in Members' mail boxes in the Members' Post Office counter.

Railways Bill

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the Government's response to the report on the Railways Bill by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. [103369]

Mr. Prescott: I am today presenting as a Command Paper (CM 4538) the Government's response to the Select Committee's report on the Railways Bill (HC 827).

The Committee's report has informed the revised railway provisions now included in the Transport Bill. Our response also covers the Committee's recommendations which did not relate directly to the Railways Bill. We will make a substantive response on transport safety regulation to the Committee when we have received and considered the results of our transport safety review.

Beacon Council Scheme

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the first Beacon Councils; and if he will make a statement. [103538]

Ms Armstrong: We intend to announce the Beacon Councils for 2000–01 on Monday 20 December. We will publish the First Report of the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils, at the same time as the announcement giving details of the Panel's recommendations on Beacon Councils, together with a brochure "The Beacon Council Scheme: Where to Go and What to See", setting out the best practice the Beacons have to offer. Copies of the two publications will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Marine Pollution

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he proposes to carry out the review of offences relating to the entry into the sea of noxious, poisonous or polluting matter following marine casualties, which he announced in response to Lord Donaldson's report on salvage and intervention and their command and control. [103550]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend has decided that the review should have the following terms of reference:

> To review the basis of, and the systems for, prosecutions in the United Kingdom for offences related to the entry into the sea of noxious, poisonous or polluting matter following marine casualties. The Review will consider how these systems should reflect the public interest of having appropriate sanctions available under the criminal law in cases where such entry occurs while not discouraging appropriate prevention, salvage and clean-up operations.

The Review will focus on offences under Part III of the Water Resources Act 1991 in respect of England and Wales and Part VI of the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, in so far as they relate to entry of such matter resulting from marine casualties and their associated salvage and clean-up operations.

The Review will also consider, in so far as it is appropriate to do so, the offence of public nuisance (including the statutory nuisance procedure) and offences relating to the entry of such matter from ships in cases which may not in themselves represent or follow marine casualties.

The results of the Review will also, if possible, take account of the outcome of the appeal against sentencing of Milford Haven Port Authority following its prosecution in connection with the Sea Empress casualty.

The Review will be carried out by a consultant, Mr. Colin Ingram, working under the supervision of a team of DETR officials. Since the Merchant Shipping legislation is a reserved matter, while the water legislation is a devolved matter, this team will need to work in close co-operation with the devolved administrations. All organisations that are known to have an interest will be invited to make submissions to the review. The invitation will also be posted on the DETR website, and we shall welcome other submissions.

Speed Cameras

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to make more effective use of roadside speed cameras; and if he will make a statement. [103549]

Mr. Hill: A number of pilot schemes to test new funding arrangements for speed and traffic light cameras will start on 1 April 2000. This will increase the number of cameras deployed, further deter speed and red light running and thereby achieve the Government's road safety objective. Each pilot scheme will involve Local Authorities, Magistrates Courts, the police, and in some cases the Highways Agency and Crown Prosecution Service. The schemes will be based in eight police areas: Essex, Northampton, Thames Valley, Nottingham, South Wales, Cleveland, Lincolnshire and Strathclyde. In the light of the results of the pilot schemes, consideration will be given to the extension of the funding arrangements nationally.

Genetically Modified Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the separation distances between genetically modified crops and non-genetically modified crops, including the farm-scale trials; and if he will list the proposed revised distances for each crop. [99534]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

My Department has secured a commitment from the industry group SCIMAC to review on a regular basis its guidelines for growing GM crops, which were published in May 1999, but as yet there are no proposals for revised separation distances. We are convening another meeting between the GM and organic sectors to discuss safeguards for organic production, including separation distances between GM and organic crops.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU Common Foreign and Security Policy

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress was made on a common foreign and security policy at the Helsinki summit. [100990]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* European Union Heads of Government at Helsinki agreed Conclusions on a number of subjects under the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including on South-Eastern Europe, the Middle East Peace Process, human rights, and Macao. They also adopted a separate Declaration on Chechnya. In addition, they agreed Conclusions adopting two Presidency reports, one on Strengthening the Common European Policy on Security and Defence and one on Non-Military Crisis Management, as part of a strengthened common European policy on security and defence.

Western Sahara

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings he (i) has had and (ii) plans to have, with *(a)* the Government of Morocco and *(b)* Polisario to discuss the situation in Western Sahara and the UN referendum process. [102491]

Mr. Hain: During my visit to Morocco between 30 November and 2 December I discussed the Western Sahara in several high-level meetings with Moroccan Ministers. FCO officials meet regularly with the Polisario in London, New York and the refugee camps in Tindouf.

British Prisoners Abroad (Clemency Pleas)

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the result of the review of Government policy on supporting pleas for clemency by British nationals imprisoned abroad. [103371]

Mr. Hain: We have reviewed our policy on making representations about the convictions and sentencing of British prisoners abroad to the authorities of the countries where they are detained.

At present we consider making such representations if, when all legal remedies have been exhausted, the British national and their lawyer have evidence of a miscarriage or denial of justice.

We are extending this to include those cases where fundamental violations of the British national's human rights had demonstrably altered the course of justice. In such cases, we would also consider supporting their request for an appeal to any official human rights body in the country concerned, and subsequently giving advice on how to take their cases to relevant international human rights mechanisms.

We have decided not to change the policy on supporting clemency pleas. We will continue to base these pleas only on compassionate grounds, namely where a prisoner is terminally ill or when a close relative is terminally ill and their death will leave children or elderly relatives with no one to care for them.

Bonded Labour (Subcontinent)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions the Government have had with the Nepalese Government regarding the incidence of bonded labour in Nepal; and what representations his Department has made to the Nepalese Government to ratify ILO Convention No. 29. [102807]

Mr. Hain: The British Embassy and DFID office in Kathmandu are both actively involved in helping the Nepalese to address the issue of bonded labour. DFID Nepal is working to develop a strategy for realising the rights of the poorest and most disadvantaged people in Nepal.

The ILO in Kathmandu has confirmed that the Nepalese Government is in the process of ratifying ILO convention 29. It is hoped that it will be ratified within the next six months.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Government will make representations to Pakistan and India requesting them to undertake surveys, at federal, provincial and district level, of the number of bonded labourers in each of these countries. [102808]

Mr. Hain: We are deeply concerned by all forms of bonded labour. I raised the issue with Indian Ministers during my visit there in November. We have also raised our concerns with Pakistan. We have welcomed the steps which the Governments of India and Pakistan have taken to reduce child labour. We have no plans to ask them to undertake surveys on this issue.

International Students

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to increase the number of students studying in the UK and ensure that the target number of students from *(a)* China and *(b)* Hong Kong by 2000–01 will be met. [102701]

Mr. Wicks: I have been asked to reply.

In June 1999 my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced an initiative to attract to the UK an extra 75,000 international students by 2005. The target relates to students who do not warrant a home fee classification. China and Hong Kong have priority in this initiative but recruitment targets have not been set for particular countries.

The initiative includes four main components. First, a world-wide marketing campaign, using a "UK Education Brand" and marketing materials to promote the high quality of UK education, will begin early in 2000. There will be enhanced promotion activity in many regions, including China and Hong Kong, where British education exhibitions, clearing missions and MBA fairs are planned. Second, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs aims to expand the Chevening Scholarship Scheme, with up to 1,000 extra scholarships awarded each year. Third, we have made it easier for international students to work part-time and in

vacations. Fourth, visa and entry procedures are being made more user-friendly for students. Through this package of measures the Government are helping UK education institutions to increase their marketing capability overseas and thereby increase international student enrolments.

DEFENCE

Naval Vessels

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Royal Naval vessels made overseas visits during the last 12 months; and if he will list *(a)* the countries visited and *(b)* the length of each visit. [102709]

Mr. Spellar: I am placing in the Library of the House a list of visits to overseas ports made by Royal Navy vessels between 1 January and 13 December 1999. In addition ships deployed under the Atlantic Patrol Task (South) and the ice patrol vessel HMS Endurance make frequent visits to the UK South Atlantic Overseas Territories.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 560W, concerning the withdrawal of naval vessels from planned exercises, if he will list *(a)* the exercises the vessels were withdrawn from and *(b)* the reasons for withdrawal. [102714]

Mr. Spellar: The RN withdrew ships from the following exercises for the reasons stated:

Ship	*Exercise*	*Reason for withdrawal*
HMS Invincible	JFTEX	Redeployment to Gulf
HMS Northumberland	Aurora 99	Redeployment as Atlantic Patrol Task (North)
HMS Ledbury	Usbaltops	Change to maintenance dates
HMS Gloucester	Argonaut 99	Operational tasking
HMS Newcastle	Argonaut 99	Operational tasking
HMS Cattistock	Open Spirit	National tasking
HMS Montrose	Northern Lights	Operational tasking
HMS Monmouth	Northern Lights	Revised training schedules
HMS Fearless	Northern Lights	Deployed to Mediterranean
HMS Ocean	Northern Lights	Deployed to Mediterranean
HMS Edinburgh	Northern Lights	Deployed to Mediterranean
HMS Sandown	Sandy Coast	To accommodate Gulf Deployment
HMS Edinburgh	Falcon Nut	Operational tasking
HMS Westminster	Flotex	In Year Budget Management Measure

Flight-Lieutenant Deborah Burns

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if a D Notice has been issued in respect of Flight-Lieutenant Deborah Burns, Royal Air Force. [102568]

Mr. Spellar: The six standing Defence Advisory Notices are concerned with matters of national security, and are not issued in response to individual cases. No Notice has been issued therefore, nor invoked, in respect of Flight-Lieutenant Burns.

RAF Chinook

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what incidents have involved RAF Chinooks in the last two weeks of November; and if he will make a statement. [102565]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Between 14 and 30 November there have been 12 reported incidents involving RAF Chinooks. Eleven of these were minor day-to-day occurrences but one incident, which occurred during a training exercise on 25 November 1999 and involved damage to the rear of the aircraft, is being investigated by a RAF Board of Inquiry. Nobody was injured. After carrying out a preliminary assessment the Board reported that they had no urgent recommendations to make affecting the Chinook fleet as a whole. Their investigation is continuing and a summary of the Board's final report will be placed in the Library of the House in the normal way.

Bosnia

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on troop levels in Bosnia. [103548]

Mr. Hoon: NATO has agreed to revise arrangements for manning the headquarters in the UK sector of SFOR. We have worked closely with our Dutch, Canadian and Czech partners on plans. This will allow a reduction in UK forces in Bosnia from around 3,300 to some 2,000 in the course of next year, while fully maintaining the operational effectiveness of SFOR. This reduction is in addition to the withdrawal of some 900 UK troops announced in late October, and will further reduce overstretch in the British Army.

Gulf Veterans

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information he has obtained regarding the number of veterans of the 1990–91 Gulf conflict that have died, and the underlying causes of death; and if he will make a statement. [103469]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has reviewed its own records and has found that between 1 April 1991 and 22 November 1999 (the latest date for which information is currently available) there were 413 deaths of UK armed forces Gulf veterans (out of a total of 53,462 deployed). The causes of death for 387 of the deaths have been determined and are set out in the table. Sufficient information on the causes of death in the remaining 26 cases is not currently available; work is continuing to establish this.

The Ministry of Defence also has information on the number and causes of deaths in a similar sized comparative sample of armed forces personnel in service in January 1991 but who did not deploy to the Gulf. This information has been used by the Ministry of Defence funded epidemiological study undertaken by Professors Nicola Cherry and Gary Macfarlane at Manchester University. The results of this study, commissioned by the Medical Research Council, have been submitted to a leading medical journal for consideration for publication. They will show whether or not the Gulf veterans are experiencing a higher mortality rate than their peers and if so what the causes might be.

It is important that this study is independently peer reviewed to ensure publication in a leading medical journal. To ensure this my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces has withheld the information on the comparative group under Exemption 11a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

UK armed forces Gulf veterans' deaths 1 April 1991 to 22 November 1999—classified according to the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases 9th revision (ICD-9) (1977) [1]

(ICD-9) (1977) Chapter	*Cause of death*	*Number of deaths*
I	Infections and parasitic diseases	3
II	Neoplasms[2]	56
V	Mental disorders	7
VI	Diseases of the nervous system and sense organs	6
VII	Diseases of the circulatory system[3]	48
VIII	Diseases of the respiratory system	4
IX	Diseases of the digestive system	5
XVI	Signs symptoms and ill-defined conditions	2
E.XVII	*External causes of injury and poisoning of which:*	256
	Transport accidents	119
	Other accidents	53
	Accidental poisoning	9
	Suicide[4]	67
	Homicide	3
	Operations of war[5]	3
	Undetermined accidental deaths	2

[1] Manual of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries and Causes of Death. World Health Organisation. Geneva (1977). ISBN 92 4 154 004 4.

[2] Neoplasm is the medical term for a new or abnormal growth of tissue. All the deaths included in the table were from cancers or leukaemia.

[3] The term includes heart disease and stroke.

[4] The term includes self-inflicted injury and cases where it is undetermined whether the inquiry was accidentally or purposely inflicted. This includes an open verdict at inquest.

[5] The term includes deaths as a result of military operations and exercises.

Forces Personnel (Traffic Accidents)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many road traffic accidents involving *(a)* civilian vehicles and *(b)* military vehicles driven by forces personnel, and handled by the Royal Military Police, have been the subject of (i) summary trials and (ii) Courts Martial in each of the last three years. [102870]

Mr. Spellar: Figures for such accidents involving forces personnel reported to the Royal Military Police are available only for 1996, 1997 and 1998.

Year	*Military vehicles*	*Private vehicles*
1996	1,365	767
1997	970	454
1998	959	353

Statistics for military offences dealt with summarily are not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Work has however begun to set up the administrative machinery required to hold such statistics in the future.

Offences against the Road Traffic Act 1988 or Disobedience to Standing Orders dealt with by Army Court Martial are set out in the following table but cannot be broken down into civilian or military vehicles.

Courts Martial

Year	*Number*
1996	8
1997	6
1998	14
Total	28

All the Courts Martial were for Driving Under the Influence, only five of them involving accidents. In the United Kingdom the civil authorities deal with offences committed on non-governmental property.

Surveillance, Target Acquisition, Night Observation and Countersurveillance Centre

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is the annual cost of the STANOC centre at Larkhill; which police forces they have assisted in the past two years; and what charges STANOC have made; [102872]

(2) if he will list *(a)* police forces, *(b)* other Government departments and agencies and *(c)* companies assisted by STANOC in each of the past two years; and what charges have been levied in each case. [102873]

Mr. Spellar: The Annual cost of The Surveillance, Target Acquisition, Night Observation and Countersurveillance Centre (STANOC) is £0.24 million.

The Centre gives assistance to the police and other Government Departments under the provisions of Military Aid to the Civil Powers, and to Industry. Assistance to the police and other Government Departments is provided without charge. The Centre charges industry for help and advice on matters relating to private venture work and work in pursuit of overseas contracts; advice to industry on UK MOD matters is given without charge. I am withholding the information on the specific charges levied in each case under section 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. I can report, however, that total recoveries since 1 January 1998 amount to £9,882. It is not possible accurately to break the figures down for each year as much of the work carried out by the Centre spans the whole period.

The organisations supported by STANOC during the past two years are as follows:

Metropolitan Police
Greater Manchester Police
Somerset and Avon Police
Dorset Police
Sussex Police
Norfolk Police
West Midlands Police
Shropshire Police
Hampshire Police
National Crime Squad
Police Scientific and Development Branch
Devon and Cornwall Police
Lothian and Borders Police
Strathclyde Police
South Wales Police
Durham Police
Lancashire Police
Wiltshire Police
MOD Police
Jersey Police
HM Customs and Excise
The Security Service
National Criminal Intelligence Service

Industry

SWAROWSKI
ETI
Cincinatti
Thompson CSF
GEC
Pilkington
Wylam Defence Systems
Avimo
Bae
Baxall
Barrington International
Barracuda
Accuracy International
GKN
Raytheon
Litton
Bridport Aviation
Flectalon
Colebrand
Roctec
MFC
Royal Ordnance
RACAL
Gore UK
Karrimor
Arkonia
CDSS
ATSI
LEICA.

Service Exercises

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many planned exercises involving *(a)* the Royal Navy, *(b)* the Army, *(c)* the RAF and *(d)* reserve forces were cancelled or went ahead without UK involvement in each of the years 1996 to 1999 indicating in each case (i) the name of the planned exercise, (ii) the estimated cost of each planned exercise to his Department had UK forces taken part, (iii) the actual cost after cancellation and (iv) the reason for cancellation; and if he will make a statement. [102679]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the right hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Asbestos

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if all Royal Naval vessels are free of asbestos in *(a)* cabins, *(b)* engine rooms and *(c)* elsewhere; and if he will make a statement. [102625]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Royal Naval vessels do contain asbestos, but in all cases there is suitable protection to safeguard the personnel on board. My Department is pursuing a comprehensive programme to eliminate asbestos wherever practicable and as soon as possible.

160 (Wales) Brigade

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to re-organise 160 (Wales) Brigade Headquarters at Brecon Barracks. [102839]

Mr. Spellar: There are no current plans to reorganise 160 (Wales) Brigade Headquarters. However, the role and function of the Headquarters will be addressed as part of a wider review of all regional brigades throughout Land Command. This review will commence in January 2000 and is scheduled to report by Easter 2000.

SCOTLAND

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102366]

Dr. Reid: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102330]

Dr. Reid: No rooms are currently set aside for ethnic minority religious use or pregnant and nursing mothers within buildings occupied by my Department, although appropriate arrangements can be made if necessary. One room is set aside for smokers.

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland in each of the last five years and the current year to date how many illegally held *(a)* shotguns, *(b)* .22 rifles, *(c)* rifles of greater calibre than .22, *(d)* handguns and *(e)* other firearms were seized by the police in each police force area in Scotland. [102163]

Dr. Reid: This information is not held centrally and could be extracted by police forces only with considerable effort and at disproportionate cost.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many homicides were committed in Scotland using *(a)* shotguns, *(b)* rifles, *(c)* handguns and *(d)* other firearms in each police force area in Scotland in each of the last five years and the current year to date; and how many homicides were committed with the use of a legally held firearm used by the owner, broken down by the type of weapon used, over the same period. [102164]

Dr. Reid: The following table details the number of homicides committed in Scotland using *(a)* shotguns, *(b)* rifles, *(c)* handguns and *(d)* other firearms in each police force area in Scotland in each of the last five years and the current year to date. Current year information relates to January to March 1999 only. Information on the number of homicides committed with the use of a legally held firearm used by the owner is not collected centrally.

Number of homicides recorded by the police in which a firearm was alleged to have been used by police force area and main firearm used, Scotland, 1994—Quarter 1, 1999

Police force area	*Shotgun*	*Rifle*	*Pistol/ revolver*	*Other firearms*[1]	*Total*
1994					
Northern	—	1	1	—	2
Fife	1	—	—	—	1
Lothian and Borders	—	—	1	—	1
Strathclyde	1	1	1	2	5
Total	2	2	3	2	9
1995					
Tayside	1	—	—	—	1
Strathclyde	1	—	1	8	10
Total	2	—	1	8	11
1996					
Northern	1	—	—	—	1
Grampian	1	—	—	—	1
Tayside	1	—	—	—	1
Central[2]	—	—	17	—	17
Strathclyde	1	—	1	3	5
Total	4	—	18	3	25
1997					
Strathclyde	1	—	5	—	6
Total	1	—	5	—	6
1998					
Fife	1	—	—	—	1
Strathclyde	1	—	1	3	5
Dumfries and Galloway	1	—	—	—	1
Total	3	—	1	3	7
Quarter 1, 1999					
Strathclyde	—	1	—	—	1
Total	—	1	—	—	1

[1] Includes those firearms which were seen but not established and those not seen.
[2] Includes the 17 victims of the Dunblane incident which occurred on 13 March 1996.

Electoral Register

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his estimate of the cost of registering an elector on the electoral register in Scotland; and what is the cost of entering a name to correct an omission from the register. [102546]

Dr. Reid: The estimated overall cost of registration of electors in Scotland is in the region of £4 million per year, or just under a pound per elector. The cost of making a single correction to the electoral register would not be very much greater than the cost of registering an elector.

New Deal Environmental Taskforce

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what projects are currently being undertaken by the New Deal Environmental Taskforce in the constituencies of Greenock and Inverclyde and West Renfrewshire; and if he will make a statement. [102624]

Dr. Reid: The projects currently taking place in Greenock and West Renfrewshire are:

Renfrewshire Council[1]

Provider	*Number of placements available*	*Project*	*Nature of provision*
Action Environment Ltd.	22	CARTS Valley and Planning	Construction of footpaths along banks of river, building walls and carrying out hard landscaping for local community wood project.
Heatwise	24	Home Insulation	Installing loft insulation in customers' homes, maintenance and care of tools and communication with customers.
Heatwise	20	Classroom Assistants	Helping to prepare people to apply to become classroom assistants in primary schools.

[1] Excluding East Renfrewshire

Inverclyde Council

Provider	*Number of placements available*	*Project*	*Nature of provision*
SOLAS/Invest	8	Home Insulation	Draught proofing, loft insulation, cavity wall insulation and insulation of pipes and tanks.
Landwise	12	Strone Farm	Landscaping and labouring duties.
Clyde Muirshiel	16	Various	Assisting with habitat management and woodland/conservation plan implementation. Will deal with people on a day to day basis, leading guided walks, assisting with biological recording and practical conservation work.

A further proposal has been submitted by Action Environment to offer 44 New Deal clients ETF opportunities in environmental enhancement, hard and soft landscaping and grounds and building maintenance.

CABINET OFFICE

"Public Bodies 1999"

Angela Smith: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she will publish "Public Bodies 1999"; and if she will make a statement. [103463]

Mr. Stringer: "Public Bodies 1999" was published earlier today. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

"Public Bodies 1999" provides a range of statistical information on over 1,500 public bodies and over 35,000 public appointments. It focuses primarily on non-departmental public bodies, but also includes information on nationalised industries, certain public corporations and those NHS bodies to which Ministers make appointments. "Public Bodies 1999" is UK-wide in its coverage and includes information on those public bodies which now operate in devolved areas in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

"Public Bodies 1999" shows that the Government are making steady progress in reducing the overall number of non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). The number of such bodies now stands at 1,057—a reduction of 6 per cent. over the 1997 total of 1,128.

"Public Bodies 1999" also shows that the Government are succeeding in increasing diversity among those serving of the board of public bodies. As at 1 September 1999, 33 per cent. of public appointments were held by women and 4.7 per cent. were held by members of ethnic minorities. This compares favourably to September 1997, when 32 per cent. of public appointments were held by women and 3.6 per cent. by members of ethnic minorities. We will continue working hard to encourage more women and more members of ethnic minorities to take up positions in public life.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what percentage of the total workforce in her Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps she is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in her Department. [102739]

Mr. Stringer: Making a dramatic improvement in diversity is a central part of the civil service reform programme. We are taking action across the civil service to address the under-representation of ethnic minorities particularly at senior levels. We have set a target to double the number of staff from ethnic minority backgrounds in the senior civil service to 3.2 per cent. by 2004–05.

The Cabinet Office is putting in place measures to help achieve corporate action, including: the appointment of an outreach worker who is working with university ethnic minority groups to build a better understanding of the opportunities in the Fast Stream; appointing a Senior Adviser to establish further pools of secondees and potential recruits and act as a source of advice to departments; planning to hold a civil service ethnic minority careers fair annually.

The Cabinet Office, as an organisation, has developed and is implementing, a Diversity Action Plan, which includes objectives and actions for setting targets for recruitment and selection; retention; and progression of under-represented groups, strengthening links with ethnic minority communities (open-days and seminars), summer work placements for school pupils, and a mentoring scheme for Cabinet Office staff and external ethnic minority undergraduates.

As at 1 April 1999 9.02 per cent. of permanent staff in the Department were of ethnic minority origin.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Payment Modernisation Programme

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 372W, what part of the benefit payment modernisation programme will not be completed until 31 December 2005; and when the computerisation of the entire Post Office network will be completed. [103000]

Mr. Rooker: Within the Payment Modernisation Programme, the Department will move away from paper

based methods of payment to payment by Automated Credit Transfer (ACT), a more modern secure and efficient way of paying benefits.

It is envisaged that the migration of customers from orderbooks and girocheques to ACT will take place over a two year period beginning in 2003 and completing in 2005. This will be managed carefully and in a way that will not put at risk the efficient distribution of benefit payments. Benefit recipients who wish to do so will continue to be able to access their benefits in cash at post offices.

The automation of the network of almost 19,000 post offices is due for completion in 2001.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his timetable for issuing draft regulations on stakeholder pensions. [102507]

Mr. Rooker: We aim to issue draft regulations on stakeholder pensions for consultation early next year, in advance of the regulations being laid by around Easter.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many companies are currently engaged in firm negotiations with the Government to introduce stakeholder pensions. [103001]

Mr. Rooker: The pension and financial services industry is involved in the consultation process on the detail of stakeholder pensions policy.

Benefits (Method of Payment)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many claimants receive *(a)* retirement pension and *(b)* other benefits from post offices in each Scottish parliamentary constituency; [102691]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of pensioners and other benefit claimants who do not have bank accounts; and what assessment he has made of the impact on such claimants of his plans to pay benefits directly into claimants' bank accounts; [102748]

(3) what estimates he has made of the number of *(a)* retirement pension claimants and *(b)* other benefit claimants within Scotland who do not have a bank account, broken down by parliamentary constituency. [102690]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

As at 31 August 1999, the total number of customers in receipt of Retirement Pension and Widows Pension in Great Britain, receiving their pension through the post office was 5.6 million.

As at 31 August 1999, the number of customers in Great Britain in receipt of benefits (other than Retirement Pension and Jobseeker's Allowance) receiving their benefit through the post office was around 11.6 million.

Estimates of the number of benefit claimants who do not have a bank account vary widely. From information available, the number of retirement benefit recipients who do not have a bank account is estimated to be in the region of 10–20 per cent. The number of other benefit recipients without a bank account is estimated to be in the region of 20 per cent.

We have decided to move to automated credit transfer (ACT) from 2003 as a modern, more secure and efficient method of paying benefits. People are increasingly choosing ACT as their preferred method of payment. The Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. will be working together to build on this trend to ensure that, from 2003, ACT offers an attractive choice to benefit recipients, opening up access to a wider range of banking and other financial services, while continuing to offer access to cash at post office counters.

Retirement Pension

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people he estimates will reach retirement age and begin to claim the state retirement pension between 12 September 1999 and 12 January 2000. [102632]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

It is estimated that around 180,000 people will reach State pension age between the 12 September 1999 and 12 January 2000.

Notes:

1. Figures are estimated by the Government Actuary's Department (GAD).

2. Future numbers of new claimants of State Retirement Pension are not estimated by GAD. The numbers of people reaching State pension age is the closest available approximation.

Cold Weather Payments (Scotland)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the *(a)* number of claimants and *(b)* cost of cold weather payments in the (i) Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber and (ii) Ross, Skye and Inverness, West constituencies in (1) 1997, (2) 1998, (3) 1999 and (4) 2000. [101960]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Social Fund is a matter for Peter Mathison the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. David Stewart, dated 15 December 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about what estimate had been made of (A) the number of claimants and (B) the cost of cold weather payments in the (i) Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber and (ii) Ross, Skye and Inverness west constituencies in (1) 1997, (2) 1998, (3) 1999 and (4) 2000.

As you may be aware, Cold Weather Payments (CWPs) are triggered if the temperature has been recorded as an average of 0°C or below over any seven consecutive days, or, a forecast shows the temperature is likely to average 0°C or below over the next seven days, for a weather station area. Temperature information is collected through a network of 72 weather stations. Each weather station covers specified postcode districts. No separate claim is necessary and the payment process can start without awaiting actual recorded temperatures. Payments are not recalled if a forecast is not confirmed by recorded data.

The attached tables detail the estimated cost and numbers of potential recipients in each constituency for 97, 98/99.

I hope this is helpful. Copies of this letter will be placed in the library.

Number of qualifying recipients by weather station and estimated cost by constituency

	1996–97		*1997–98*		*1998–99*	
	A	*B*	*A*	*B*	*A*	*B*
	Triggers	*Estimated recipients*	*Triggers*	*Estimated recipients*	*Triggers*	*Estimated recipients*
Weather station						
Aulbea	0	238	0	349	0	317
Loch Glascarnoch	5	1,880	3	1,904	2	1,928
Lusa	—	—	—	—	0	499
Waterstein Head	—	—	0	519	—	—
Tiree	0	751	0	140	0	152
Wick	2	1,981	1	1,977	0	1,939
Tulloch Bridge	4	1,935	0	[1]1,935	2	[1]1,935
Kinloss	3	8,147	0	8,372	0	8,027
Estimated cost						
Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (£)	—	96,180	—	24,080	—	18,544
Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (£)	—	84,107	—	—	—	12,217

[1] These figures for Tulloch Bridge are extrapolations from 1996–97, not true estimates.

Notes:

1. Kinloss and Tulloch Bridge stations serve both constituencies. The other six stations do not serve Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber. Each station also serves areas outside these two constituencies. The total estimated recipients for all the weather stations is therefore substantially higher than the total of estimated recipients in the two constituencies. The calculation of the estimated cost takes this into account.
2. The figures in the table represent an estimate of the actual total cost per constituency. The cost of triggers at Kinloss and Tulloch Bridge has been split equally between the two constituencies.
3. The estimated cost has been calculated by multiplying the number of triggers (A) by the number of estimated recipients served by each station (B) by the cost per CWP (£8.50), then multiplied by the number of total qualifying individuals in each constituency (C) (from the following table) divided by the total estimated recipients served by all relevant stations for each constituency.
4. Waterstein Head station did not exist in 1996–97. Its catchment was drawn from Tiree for 1997–98. It was then replaced by another new station, Lusa, in 1998–99.
5. It is not possible to estimate the cost or number of payments for a future period for the year 2000 as CWPs are dependent on prevailing weather conditions and the caseload at the time.

Estimated number of qualifying individuals August 1997 to August 1999 by parliamentary constituency area

	C 1997	*C 1998*	*C 1999*
Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber	3,100	3,300	3,400
Ross, Skye and Inverness, West	3,800	3,700	3,700

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of the Income Support caseload and figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Some income-based Jobseeker's Allowance recipients may qualify, but the numbers are estimated to be negligible so have not been included in the estimates of qualifying individuals.
3. Estimates are based on a sample of cases, and are subject to a degree of sampling error and therefore provide only a guide to the situation.
4. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 1999 version 1 of the Postcode Directory and as such represent constituency boundaries as at 1 May 1997.

Appendix

There have been significant changes in the postcode districts linked to weather station areas over the period in question. Of particular interest in respect of the Inverness area was the transfer of postcodes IV 47–49, 51, 55 and 56 from the station at Tiree to the new station at Waterstein Head in 1997; the replacement of the station at Waterstein Head by that at Lusa in 1998, and, most significantly and recently, the transfer of postcode district IV3 from the station at Loch Glascarnoch to the station at Kinloss in 1999. Unfortunately a printing error resulted in the IV3 postcode being omitted from the current print of the cold weather payment handbook. The relevant district has been informed and an appropriate amendment will be made at the next review.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will issue an instruction to all Benefits Agency staff requiring them to disregard the value of the Winter Fuel Payment when assessing the value of capital in any assessments of entitlement to income-related benefits. [102998]

Angela Eagle: Winter Fuel Payments are made under the Social Fund. Income-related benefits legislation provides for all types of Social Fund payments to be fully disregarded in the assessment of a person's capital. This is reflected in guidance to Benefits Agency staff in both the Decision Makers' Guide (DMG) and the Guidance and Procedures manual (GAP).

If the hon. Member believes that this guidance has not been followed in a particular case, he or the individual concerned should contact the local Benefits Agency office.

Benefit Disregards

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will review the levels of capital and income disregards for the benefits for which his Department is responsible. [102510]

Mr. Bayley: We continue to keep the levels of capital and income disregards in all income-related benefits under review as part of the welfare reform and modernisation programme that the Department is currently undertaking.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he *(a)* has made and *(b)* intends to carry out of the contribution that a raising of the levels of capital and income disregards for benefits paid out of public funds would make to the Government's policy of reducing poverty. [102512]

Mr. Bayley: We outlined our commitment to looking at ways to better reward savers in the Pensions Green Paper with a view to ensuring that the least well-off pensioners share in the rising national prosperity. We will bring forward our proposals later in this Parliament.

Invalid Carers Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimates he has made of the earnings of recipients of invalid carers allowance in the last year for which figures are available. [102781]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available.

Income Distribution

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the change in average income has been since 1997; how the real income after housing costs of *(a)* the poorest 10 per cent. and *(b)* the richest 10 per cent. in the UK have changed since 1997; and what was the average income for (i) men and (ii) women in each year since 1997. [102890]

Mr. Bayley: The latest available information is published in "Households Below Average Income" (HBAI) and relates to 1997–98 for Great Britain. In that year, mean income Before Housing Costs was £318 per week (in April 1999 prices), £277 After Housing Costs.

Median net equivalised household income of the bottom 10 per cent. of individuals, After Housing Costs, was £71 per week, and of the top 10 per cent. was £600 per week.

HBAI assumes that both partners in a couple benefit equally from the household income, and as a result both partners will appear at the same position in the income distribution. On that basis, mean net equivalised household income for men was £301 per week, and for women was £279 per week.

The Department's statisticians hope to publish the next edition of HBAI, providing information for 1998–99, in the summer of 2000.

Notes:

1. All estimates are subject to sampling error.
2. The HBAI income measure is weekly net (disposable) equivalised household income (that is to say, income that is adjusted to reflect the size and composition of the household).
3. Figures for the bottom 10 per cent. should be treated with caution, as evidence suggests that those in the bottom decile do not necessarily have the lowest living standards.

Independent Living Fund

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much has been paid out by the Independent Living Fund in each of the last five years; and how much has been awarded to claimants with *(a)* physical and *(b)* learning disabilities. [102765]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. The Funds do not keep records of grants paid to clients as a result of a particular disability. ILF grants are paid on the basis of an individual's care needs. Such information as is available is in the tables.

The amounts paid out as grants by the independent living funds in the last five years

£

Year	*1993 Fund*	*Extension Fund*
1994–95	6,577,784	100,568,587
1995–96	15,820,289	92,875,374
1996–97	25,375,617	84,001,152
1997–98	34,762,568	76,354,566
1998–99	43,030,022	71,924,318

Data held by the Independent Living (1993) Fund give a breakdown of clients by primary recorded disability.

Independent living (1993) Fund—Client load in September 1999

Disability	*Number*	*Percentage*
Severe learning difficulties	1,481	27
Multiple sclerosis	891	16
Cerebral palsy	767	14
Spinal injury	454	8
Brain damage	360	7
Cerebro-vascular	302	5
Muscular dystrophy	205	4
Arthritis	144	3
Epilepsy	136	2
Parksinson's disease	64	—
Spina bifida	59	—
Friedrich's Ataxia	53	—
Mental illness	51	—
Huntington's Chorea	50	—
AIDS	36	—
Cancer	36	—
Dementia	32	—
Motor neurone disease	31	—
Polio	29	—
Heart disease	23	—
Respiratory disease	23	—
Hydrocephalus	17	—
Physical malformation	20	—
Blood disease	10	—
Osteoporosis	5	—
Other	237	—

Note:

No similar information exists for the Independent Living (Extension) Fund.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are waiting to have their application for a resident's visa processed. [102499]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The most recent figures we have show that at the end of October, 8,596 applicants were waiting for settlement visa interviews at the 100 busiest Entry Clearance posts overseas. This figure excludes those applicants waiting in Peking where computer problems have delayed the production of statistical data. The figure also excludes applications referred to the Home Office for a decision; and applications under appeal. During the period January to October 1999, the Posts concerned received 1,314,397 applications for settlement and non-settlement visas for the UK.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Criminal Records Bureau will come into operation; and if he will make a statement. [103466]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 14 December 1998, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in a reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner), *Official Report,* column 356W, that we would be setting up a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) in Merseyside to implement Part V of the Police Act 1997. The function of the Bureau will be to issue certificates to applicants, including people who wish to apply for posts involving working with children and vulnerable adults. On 20 July, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Department announced in a reply to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), *Official Report,* column 464W, that he was reviewing the timetable for the delivery of the CRB and that he would inform the House of the results after the recess.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has confirmed that Bernard Herdan, the newly appointed Chief Executive of the United Kingdom Passport Agency, will also be in charge of the CRB. He will chair the CRB Management Board and account to the Home Secretary, to Parliament and to stakeholders for the CRB's performance. Some administrative support functions will be provided to the CRB by the United Kingdom Passport Agency, but in general it will operate as an entirely separate business unit and will be publishing its own Business Plan and Annual Report.

I have reviewed the delivery of the project to establish the CRB within the framework of a Public Private Partnership. A dedicated team has been established in Merseyside to deliver the project. A business prospectus was issued on 8 October and a bidders conference was held on 14 October. I am pleased to report that there has been a substantial amount of interest from potential private sector partners, and bids were received on 19 November and are under evaluation. Shortlisted bidders will be invited to take part in a technical design study next spring and we hope to be in a position to let the contract around the middle of next year. It will then take about six to nine months to install the necessary systems and recruit the staff before the Bureau is ready to receive applications for registration from employers requiring access to the highest level certificates on behalf of their employees.

My aim is that the CRB should then move on to the next stage and start issuing certificates in July 2001. This is later than our original estimate, but this is a challenging programme and I think it important that the timescale is realistic. Priority will be given to issuing the highest level of certificate, the Enhanced Criminal Record Certificate, for those seeking positions which involve regularly caring for, training, supervising or being in sole charge of persons aged under 18. The CRB's services will expand over the subsequent year so that, by July 2002, it should be issuing all three levels of certificate provided for in the legislation.

In the course of the review, we have decided that it is not necessary to proceed with earlier plans to procure accommodation to house the whole of the CRB's staff. While it remains our intention to accommodate the Bureau's core public sector staff in Merseyside, we think it right to give our private sector partner the flexibility needed to produce the best, most cost-effective solution. The project will continue to be managed from Merseyside.

Coastal Byelaws

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the transfer of responsibility for the confirmation of coastal byelaws. [103467]

Mr. Straw: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has agreed that, with effect from 1 January 2000, responsibility for the confirmation of byelaws under section 76 of the Public Health Act 1961 (in respect of seaside pleasure boats) and under section 185 of the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980 (in respect of pleasure boats and vessels let for hire to the public) will be transferred to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency will deal with applications from local authorities for confirmation of these byelaws in England. A Home Office Circular giving further details is being issued to local authorities.

Communications Interception

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he intends to publish responses to the consultation paper, "Interception of Communications in the United Kingdom". [103468]

Mr. Straw: Copies of all responses to the consultation paper, "Interception of Communications in the United Kingdom", have been published today on the Home Office website, where permission to publish was not withheld. A summary of all the responses has also been published, and placed in the Library.

Police (Hearing Impairment)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Metropolitan police force has made negligence compensation payments in the last two years to police officers who have developed a hearing loss or tinnitus as a result of their work duties. [102876]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District tells me that negligence compensation payments have been paid to police officers who have developed a hearing loss or tinnitus as a result of their work duties.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what policies the Metropolitan police force has adopted to minimise the level of hearing loss or tinnitus caused by work duties of police officers. [102877]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District tells me that the Directorate of Occupational Health provides regular audiometry testing for identified "at risk" groups: motorcyclists, firearms officers, dog handlers and Thames Division. Since 1973, Firearms Officers have been issued with ear protectors when firearms training is undertaken. A Consultant is also employed to advise on measures for protecting hearing.

Detective Inspector John Redgrave

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the new Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis received the papers relating to the case of D. I. John Redgrave and others from the hon. Member for Thurrock; and when the hon. Member will receive an acknowledgement of their receipt. [102999]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the letter from my hon. Friend, with accompanying papers, was received in the Deputy Commissioner's office on 2 December. The Director, Complaints Investigation Bureau, sent an acknowledgement of the correspondence on 14 December.

Factory Fires

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what toxins were present in the atmosphere as a result of the fire at the Wilton Bradley factory, Long Road, Paignton; [102896]

(2) if he will make a statement about the emergency services' response to the Wilton Bradley factory fire, Long Road, Paignton, on Friday 10 December; [102891]

(3) when the last risk inspection was carried out by the Fire and Rescue Service at the Wilton Bradley factory, Long Road, Paignton; and if he will make a statement; [102892]

(4) what reports he has received about the advice given by the Fire Service on the safety systems which were in place at the Wilton Bradley factory, Long Road, Paignton to minimise the risk of and spread of fire; [102885]

(5) what are the risks to human health from *(a)* the inhalation and *(b)* the ingestion of the chemicals released in the fire at the Wilton Bradley factory, Long Road, Paignton; and if he will make a statement; [102897]

(6) if he will publish the tactical information plan for the Wilton Bradley factory, Long Road, Paignton; [102893]

(7) when the Devon Fire Service Chemdata in respect of the Wilton Bradley factory, Long Road, Paignton, was last updated; and if he will make a statement. [102894]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have received the following information from the Chief Fire Officer, Devon Fire and Rescue Service.

The premises were built in 1970, and were issued with a Fire Certificate under the Fire Precautions Act 1971 on 18 February 1991. This certificate related to the use of the premises as a cash and carry warehouse.

Plans submitted by the current occupiers during June 1998, for approval under the Buildings Regulations, were considered for compliance by both the Torbay Council and Devon Fire and Rescue Service. The standards applied are contained in the Building Regulations Approved Document B. The intent of the Regulations is to secure reasonable standards of health and safety for persons in or about the building. There is no requirement for a building put to this use and of this size to be provided with either automatic fire detection or sprinklers. On receipt of a Building Regulations Completion Certificate, in respect of the work covered by the plans, an inspection was to have been carried out with the intent of updating the Fire Certificate.

On 1 December 1999 the Fire Precautions (Workplace) (Amendments) Regulations 1999 came into force, placing a requirement upon the employer to carry out a risk assessment to minimise the risk of and spread of fire.

The Devon Fire and Rescue Service is currently carrying out a programme of visits to all certificated premises raising the awareness of the employer regarding these Regulations. These visits are intended to:

give fire prevention advice;

gather operational information; and

enforce fire safety legislation as appropriate.

The last visit by the fire service to the Wilton Bradley factory, Paignton, was on 25 January 1999. This was a fire safety inspection carried out by operational firefighters from Paignton fire station.

Devon Fire and Rescue Service received the call to the fire at the Wilton Bradley Factory at 22.58 hours on 9 December 1999. A fire engine was en route to the site at 23.00 hours and in attendance at the fire at 23.04 hours. This was well within the 8–10 minute maximum response time recommended by the minimum standard of fire cover for the area. As a matter of policy the brigade mobilised two fire engines and one supervisory officer immediately. The second fire engine arrived at 23.07 hours and the officer at 23.17 hours. At the height of the incident a total of 17 fire brigade appliances (including specialist vehicles) and 80 firefighters attended. There was a multi-agency response including police, ambulance and environmental health.

The Tactical Information Plan is a new concept based upon a computer based operational plan recently devised by Devon Fire and Rescue Service in order to ensure that firefighters have appropriate information at the scene of an incident. The system is in the early stages of development and, at the time of the incident, the premises had not been visited.

The first air quality monitoring measurements were acquired by Somerset Scientific Services on behalf of Torbay Council at 12 mid-day on 10 December. Air samples for hydrogen chloride, hydrogen cyanide, hydrogen fluoride styrene and ammonia were examined at that time and all were negative in the building with the exception of hydrogen chloride which read two parts per million. The tests were repeated in Long Road at 13.30 hours when all results were negative with the exception of hydrogen chloride which was recorded at less than one part per million.

In total 47 individual air samples were taken and the only other positive recordings were in respect of hydrogen cyanide at one part per million in Kingsway Drive, Paignton, at the properties closest to the fire. At this location eight tests for hydrogen cyanide were repeated and two registered levels at one part per million, the remainder were negative.

34 environmental samples were taken of vegetation/ leaves, soil, food and water and remain to be analysed and 58 samples were taken searching for asbestos including bulk asbestos swabs, vegetation and airborne fibre counts. Results of these analyses are awaited but of the 16 airborne fibre counts examined no asbestos fibres were found.

South and West Devon Health Authority has reported a number of minor symptoms experienced by people who were exposed to the smoke; about 18 people attended the local Accident and Emergency Department, 10 contacted a General Practitioner and about 20 telephoned National Health Service Direct. The symptoms reported included eye and skin irritation and mild breathing problems. There were no reports of serious symptoms directly caused by the smoke.

Monitoring results did not reveal any significant toxic substances and no long term effects are expected. The low levels of hydrogen chloride that were detected would explain the symptoms described.

The Public Health Department at South and West Devon Health Authority is carrying out a questionnaire survey in the affected area in order to document the health effects of the incident and to monitor the population for potential long term effects, although these are considered to be unlikely.

Chemdata is a generic chemical information database widely used throughout the fire service. As such it is not premises specific. Devon Fire and Rescue Service had in place the latest version of the database at the time of the fire. This updated database was loaded onto the Devon Fire and Rescue Service computer system on 23 November 1999.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many factory fire incidents involving chemicals occurred, broken down by fire authority, in each of the past 10 years for which figures are available. [102895]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is not readily available and I will reply as soon as possible.

Drink-related Crime

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the number of convictions for crimes where alcohol abuse was a factor in each of the last three years. [102553]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not available. With the exception of offences which specifically mention alcohol (ie, drunkenness and driving while under the influence of alcohol) it is not possible to define objectively what constitutes a drink-related crime or to state definitely that alcohol abuse led or helped lead to a specific offence.

Sex Offenders

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Government will announce the conclusions of the review of the effectiveness of the register of sex offenders. [102711]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is anticipated that the results of the review of the effectiveness of the register will be available next spring. Following its publication we will be looking at whether, and if so what, changes might be necessary to the Sex Offenders Act 1997 in consultation with the police and non-governmental bodies concerned.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce measures for the monitoring of sex offenders who travel. [102712]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We fully recognise the concerns expressed over the need to keep track of sex offenders who travel abroad or have convictions for sex offences committed abroad and who return to this country. We are at present conducting an evaluation of the operation of the registration requirement in the 1997 Act. Once this review is completed, we will need to consider whether, and if so what, changes are necessary. We intend to do this in full consultation with the police and non-governmental bodies working in this area. Primary legislation will be required for any changes to the Act.

Property Crime (Devon and Cornwall)

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has in respect of safeguarding homes in Devon and Cornwall against the rise in property crime forecast by his Department. [102683]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The £250 million Crime Reduction Programme that was launched in July 1998 and the Crime Reduction Strategy that we announced last week will benefit homes in Devon and Cornwall as well as elsewhere in England and Wales.

An important strand of the programme is the Reducing Burglary Initiative, under which more than £50 million will be used to support anti-burglary projects over three years covering some two million households in 500 areas of England and Wales with high levels of domestic burglary. As well as helping to reduce burglary locally, the initiative will provide practical evidence which will benefit all local crime and disorder reduction partnerships seeking to improve their anti-burglary strategies. Of the 63 first-round strategic development projects already underway, two are based in Devon and Cornwall: one in

central Plymouth and the other in Tormohun (Torbay). Three second-round bids have been received so far from Devon and Cornwall and a decision on these bids will be taken in January.

A further £153 million will be invested over the next three years under the Closed Circuit Television Initiative and some projects will be funded in due course in Devon and Cornwall.

We have also recently launched the Property Crime Reduction Action Team which we expect to make a real impact on property crime by bringing together partners in central and local government, police, fire service and key players in the insurance and commercial sectors.

PRIME MINISTER

Cologne Summit

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the form, frequency and nature of the additional verifiable quantitative targets to be established for the Luxembourg process, as indicated in section 10 of the Presidency Conclusions of the Cologne Summit. [101021]

The Prime Minister: The issue of whether to introduce additional verifiable quantitative targets for the Luxembourg process has been discussed in respect of proposals for the Employment Guidelines for 2000. There are currently no proposals to do so. The Employment Guidelines were adopted by the European Council meeting in Helsinki on 10–11 December.

Downing Street Dinner

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Prime Minister if the dinner held at Number 10 Downing Street on 21 October was paid for out of public funds. [102121]

The Prime Minister: As under previous Administrations, all costs in relation to hospitality undertaken in an official capacity by the Prime Minister are met from public funds.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tourism

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people have been employed by the tourism industry in each of the past 20 years *(a)* in total in the UK and *(b)* in each region. [101307]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The estimates of the number of employee and self-employment jobs in the tourism-related industries in Great Britain, Scotland, Wales and each region in England in each of the last 20 years for which information is available is presented in the table.

There is a discontinuity in each data series in 1994 owing to introduction of revised UK Standard Industrial Classifications. From 1994, SIC 92 codes were used to classify industries in employment surveys. Prior to that, SIC 80 codes were used. While generally the same industries were included within the definition for the tourism-related industries under both sets of classifications, there are differences. For instance, under SIC 92, the tourism-related industries include travel agencies and tour operators, while under SIC 80 some activities, such as the operating of fairgrounds, were included.

Estimates for the number of self-employed are provided by the Labour Force Survey, which bases its annual figures on employment in the spring months (March to May).

The employee jobs figures presented are taken from the Census of Employment (prior to 1994), the Annual Employment Survey (1995 to 1997) and the Short-term Employment Surveys (1994, 1998, 1999). Prior to 1995, the major employee jobs surveys were not carried out on an annual basis. The annual data taken from the Census of Employment and the Annual Employment Survey are from September each year, while figures presented from the Short-term Employment Surveys are for June each year.

Employee and self-employment jobs in the tourism-related industries by Great Britain, Scotland, Wales and English region 1984 to 1999

Thousand

	1984 [1]	*1987* [1]	*1989* [1]	*1991* [1]	*1994* [2]	*1995* [2]	*1996* [2]	*1997* [2]	*1998* [2]	*1999* [2]
Great Britain	1,419	1,502	1,679	1,700	1,667	1,741	1,734	1,812	1,786	1,786
Scotland	145	152	173	171	184	185	179	176	121	173
Wales	68	75	88	93	88	79	84	84	85	89
South East	247	254	289	285	285	309	321	341	326	326
London	206	222	228	230	240	263	249	280	286	282
East Anglia	49	54	61	61	61	63	69	64	70	74
South West	136	142	172	178	165	175	177	179	169	173
West Midlands	108	119	131	136	138	136	140	145	136	139
East Midlands	79	94	102	110	107	106	109	112	115	113
Yorkshire and Humberside	118	132	149	147	147	144	144	154	150	147
North West	183	170	190	195	168	189	171	188	176	184
North	81	87	95	94	84	91	90	90	92	85

[1] Industry definitions based on SIC 80 classifications

[2] Industry definitions based on SIC 92 classifications

Note:

Revisions to the 1995 and 1996 Annual Employment Survey resulted in an upward step in the employee jobs series from September 1995. Data at this level of detail have not been corrected for this upward step.

Union Flag

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what days of the year it is *(a)* required and *(b)* permitted for the Union flag to be flown from (i) Government buildings, (ii) headquarters of public bodies, (iii) police stations and (iv) schools. [101708]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* There are currently 20 appointed days each year when it is required, by command of Her Majesty the Queen, that Government buildings fly the Union flag. While there is no formal definition of a Government building for this purpose, it is generally accepted to mean a building owned or used by the Crown and predominately occupied or used by Civil Servants or Her Majesty's armed forces. The headquarters of public bodies, police stations and schools are exempt from these instructions, but the police have chosen to follow the Central Government arrangements.

The days required are:

Appointed days	
6 February	Her Majesty's Accession
19 February	Birth of the Duke of York
1 March	St. David's Day (in Wales only)
10 March	Birthday of The Earl of Wessex
March (second Monday)	Commonwealth day
21 April	Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen
23 April	St. George's Day (in England only)
9 May	Europe Day
2 June	Coronation Day
June (date to be notified)	Official Celebration of Her Majesty's Birthday
10 June	Birthday of the Duke of Edinburgh
4 August	Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother
15 August	Birthday of the Princess Royal
21 August	Birthday of the Princess Margaret
November (second Sunday)	Remembrance Day
14 November	Birthday of the Prince of Wales
20 November	Her Majesty's Wedding Day
30 November	St. Andrew's Day (in Scotland only)
also	The day of the opening of a Session of the Houses of Parliament by Her Majesty
	The day of the prorogation of a Session of the Houses of Parliament by Her Majesty

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish a list of those invited to attend the Millennium Dome on 31 December, other than those described as ordinary members of the public, who have subsequently indicated they will not be attending. [102255]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* The details of those concerned are held on the Dome Opening Celebration's secure database and are subject to data protection legislation. All those concerned would need to be contacted for their agreement to release their details. The costs of doing so, including the opportunity costs of moving NMEC employees on to such a task, are at this stage of the project disproportionate to the outcome, especially when the results would be uncertain in terms of agreements and refusals.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102333]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department has four buildings which are under its direct control and occupied by DCMS staff. These are: 2–4 Cockspur Street; Grove House, 2–6 Orange Street; 6th floor Haymarket House, Oxendon Street; and Queen's Yard, 179a Tottenham Court Road.

Smoking rooms are provided in accordance with departmental policy, with the exception of the new premises at Tottenham Court Road for the Government Art Collection. At these premises, smoking anywhere within the building is deemed an unacceptable fire hazard and none of the staff currently employed there are smokers.

First aid rooms are available for pregnant and nursing mothers. Although no rooms are specifically set aside for ethnic minority religious use, the Department is flexible in accommodating such needs.

Digital Television

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many submissions he received during his consultation on the future funding of the BBC which were *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* opposed to a digital television licence fee, indicating the organisations and individuals in each case. [102409]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Over 2,000 responses to the public consultation were received by the end of November. Of the 543 which commented on the independent review panel's recommendation for a digital licence supplement, *(a)* 14 were in favour and *(b)* 529 were opposed to the proposal. I will publish a summary of responses when I announce my decisions on the Davies panel's recommendations in January.

Sports Funding

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the amount of public funds given to support sporting activities for *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [102192]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Information on the amount of public funds given is not available in the form requested. However, to date Sport has been awarded £1.145 billion from the National Lottery, which has benefited 5,089 capital projects. Additionally, the Sports Councils, through which my Department's funding for sport is channelled, have received £234.3 million grant in aid in the last five years to provide support to the governing bodies of sport and other representative bodies. Funding of around £750,000 is being provided this year to three gender-specific sports: women's netball, rugby and football. All applications for a Lottery award should demonstrate that it would benefit all sections of the community, including young people, ethnic communities, people with disabilities, older people and women.

Hotel, Catering and Restaurant Trade

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people were employed in the hotel, catering and restaurant trade *(a)* in each of the last 20 years, *(b)* on 1 May 1997 and *(c)* at the most recent date for which figures are available. [102424]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Estimates of the total number of employee and self-employment jobs in the hotel, catering and restaurant trade in Great Britain are available for 1984 onwards and are presented in the table:

Employee and self-employment jobs in hotels, restaurants and catering
Great Britain

	Thousand
	Number
1984	1,154
1985	1,188
1986	1,201
1987	1,194
1988	1,268
1989	1,348
1990	1,391
1991	1,366
1992	1,355
1993	1,319
1994	1,323
1995	1,386
1996	1,419
1997	1,452
1998	1,443
1999	1,425

Source:
Office for National Statistics

Estimates for the number of self-employed are provided by the Labour Force Survey, which bases its annual figures on employment in the spring months (March to May). The employee jobs figures are derived from official employment surveys and are for June each year. The employment surveys are conducted at regular fixed points each year, and therefore information is not available for employment in the hotel, catering and restaurant trade on 1 May 1997.

The latest available estimate for the annual number of employee and self-employment jobs in the hotel, catering and restaurant trade is for 1999, and is presented in the table.

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions he has had with the Television Licensing Authority regarding the provision whereby sheltered schemes can lose their concession if residents include men between the ages of 60 to 65 years; [102227]

(2) if he will review the rules on the eligibility of sheltered housing schemes for concessionary television licences to allow schemes which include some residents under pensionable age to qualify for the concession. [102522]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* The Government are considering the Davies report's recommendations on the concessionary scheme in the light of responses to the public consultation, including those of the BBC as Licensing Authority. We intend to announce our conclusions in January.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make transitional arrangements to assist those living in households containing a resident aged over 75 years who buys a television licence which extends into the period when such households no longer have to pay the licence fee. [102621]

Janet Anderson: The Government anticipate that the arrangements for free television licences for pensioners aged 75 or over will incorporate provisions for refunds in respect of unexpired licences. We intend to announce shortly full details of how the scheme will operate.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Chief Electoral Officer's Report

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland for 1998–99. [103367]

Mr. Mandelson: I am pleased to announce that the annual report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland for the year 1998–99 has today been laid before Parliament. Copies are available in the Library.

Adult Education

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what support is available from his Department for adult students from Northern Ireland to attend *(a)* Ruskin College, Oxford and *(b)* other institutions; and if he will make a statement; [102681]

(2) if adult students from Northern Ireland are eligible for adult education bursaries in higher education; and if he will make a statement. [102680]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Military Withdrawal

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent representations he has received from *(a)* political parties and *(b)* community groups concerning the withdrawal of troops and the dismantling of military structures; and if he will make a statement. [102622]

Mr. Ingram: There have been a number of representations recently from both political parties and community groups for the dismantling of military structures in Belfast and in South Armagh and the withdrawal of troops from East Tyrone.

On 3 December, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that a review is now under way, with the Chief Constable and GOC, which will focus particularly on specific security arrangements, including various installations throughout Northern Ireland, taking account of the prevailing threat. Any changes will of course depend on genuine cessations of violence and continued progress in the political process.

The first phase of this review will be completed early in the new year. The Secretary of State has invited people who wish to send him their written views to do so by 14 January.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef on the Bone

Ms Keeble: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the retail ban on beef-on-the-bone will be lifted on 17 December; and if he will make a statement. [103558]

Mr. Nick Brown: Consultation on the draft Regulations to lift the retail ban on bone-in-beef was completed on Wednesday 8 December and showed strong support for the proposal. A summary of consultation responses has been placed in the Library of the House. The Regulations have been laid before the House today and will come into effect on Friday 17 December.

The remaining ban on the use for manufacturing of bones from beef deboned in Great Britain will continue to be kept under review. Meanwhile, manufacturers are being reminded of the continuing importance of compliance in the interest of public health and to help maintain consumer confidence in beef products. In addition, caterers are being asked to ensure that information is readily available to consumers about whether bone-in-beef or beef bones have been used in the preparation of food for direct sale.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will give details of the projects on the risks to agriculture from the release of GMOs funded by his Department and completed in the last six months. [103559]

Ms Quin: Three projects on the effects associated with GMOs have been completed in the last six months. These are: an investigation of the interaction between genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMOs) living around sugar beet plants; a study of the chances of the creation of novel viruses from the release of GM virus-tolerant plants; and a desk study of the possible effects associated with the introduction of GM forage grasses and forage legumes. The results of these projects will inform policy on future releases of GMOs.

Details of all three projects are available from the MAFF Library.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will bring further areas into the badger culling trial recommended by Professor Krebs to address questions about the incidence of tuberculosis in cattle. [103366]

Ms Quin: The Government are committed to a wide-ranging research and control strategy to find a science-based solution to TB in cattle. The badger culling trial is an important element of that strategy. I am pleased to announce that the sixth set of trial areas will be located in West Cornwall and that work is progressing on identifying the remaining areas.

Veterinary Drugs (Merchants)

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if Agriculture and Health Ministers have determined the fees to be paid by merchants and saddlers for registration in 2000–01 with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain under the Medicines (Exemptions for Merchants in Veterinary Drugs) Order 1998. [103560]

Ms Quin: Yes. The Schedule of Fees for Registration is given in the table.

£

Application in respect of each premises fee	*Fee* *Previous*	*New*
Agricultural Merchants		
1. For registration under article 5	243	197
2. For retention of registration under article 5	138	122
3. For restoration of registration under article 5	209	166
Saddlers		
1. For registration under article 5	112	123
2. For retention of registration under article 5	65	73
3. For restoration of registration under article 5	97	107

Rural Development

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the current level of expenditure under the Rural Development Regulations indicating the amount of funding that is received from the EU. [102783]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Rural Development Regulation does not apply in relation to Community support until 1 January 2000.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the amount of money that will be paid under the Rural Development Regulations in each of the seven years from 2001, indicating the amount from each contributing budget. [102784]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Proposed expenditure under the England Rural Development Plan, subject to European Commission approval, and the Government's 2000 Spending Review is as follows:

£ million

Source of funding	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*
Total Planned Expenditure	173	205	236	263	279	295
EU receipts	50	50	50	50	50	50
MAFF CSR (subject to Spending Review)	91	91	91	91	91	91
Modulation receipts	22	45	50	54	62	70
Exchequer match funding	22	45	50	54	62	70
Total[1]	185	[2]232	241	249	265	281

[1] Deficits in some years can be funded by carrying over surplus modulation receipts in others
[2] Figures may differ due to roundings

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which bodies are responsible for the administration and oversight of the Rural Enterprise Scheme. [102788]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Subject to European Commission approval of the England Rural Development Plan, the Ministry of Agriculture's regional organisation will be responsible for the administration of the Rural Enterprise Scheme. We are proposing that oversight of this Scheme, and the other project-based support schemes under the Rural Development Regulation, will be carried out by the regional partnerships which are drawing up the regional chapters of the Plan.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which organisations were provided with copies of *(a)* his statement on rural development and *(b)* the proposals contained within that statement, before he made the statement to the House on 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 701–12. [102809]

Mr. Nick Brown: No organisations were provided with copies of my statement, or of my proposals, before I made my statement to the House on 7 December.

Ministerial Contacts (France)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the dates since 1 August on which he *(a)* met and *(b)* spoke by telephone with the French Minister of Agriculture. [102805]

Mr. Nick Brown: I *(a)* personally met the French Agriculture Minister on 14 September, 2 November, 15 November and 14 December, and *(b)* spoke to him by telephone directly on a number of occasions. There have also been a large number of contacts between officials acting on our behalf.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at what times between 10 pm on 8 December and 12.30 pm on 9 December he discussed with the Prime Minister the French Government's decision to maintain their ban on the import of British beef. [102806]

Mr. Nick Brown: I am in regular contact with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much his Department has spent on Ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98689]

Mr. Wills: For information on spend on the Government Car Service, I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 255–56W. Additionally, £7,607 was spent in 1997–98 and £14,597 was spent in 1998–99 on car hire. All Ministerial travel adheres to the terms of the "Ministerial Code" and "Travel by Ministers".

Individual Learning Account

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many individual learning accounts have been allocated in the current development phase; and how many of them have been redeemed. [102408]

Mr. Wicks: By the end of September, 56,917 individual learning accounts had been opened by English TECs/CCTEs in the current development phase. To date, TECs/CCTEs have contributed £2,927,749 to these accounts.

Nursery Classes

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to change the guidance to local education authorities on pupil-staff ratios in nursery *(a)* classes and *(b)* schools; and how many in each category have a ratio above the current recommended level. [102555]

Ms Hodge: I have no plans to change current guidance on pupil-staff ratios in nursery classes and nursery schools in the maintained sector. Data on pupil-staff ratios in these settings are available only as an aggregated value for each local education authority. This information was last collected by my Department in January 1999 and suggests that all local education authorities are operating nursery schools with pupil-staff ratios which are within current recommended levels and that approximately 99 per cent. are operating more favourable ratios. In addition, 49 per cent. of local education authorities are providing nursery classes in maintained primary schools with pupil-staff ratios that are within or better than the recommended level.

Ethnic Minority Funding

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the figures for Section 11 funding for (i) Middlesbrough, (ii) Stockton, (iii) Hartlepool and (iv) Redcar and Cleveland local authorities for the last three years. [102640]

Jacqui Smith: Funding under the education element of the Home Office's Section 11 Grant ceased on 31 March 1999. A new grant, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG), for which my Department is responsible, was introduced in its place from 1 April 1999. EMAG was established to raise standards for those ethnic minority pupils particularly at risk of underachieving and to meet the particular needs of pupils for whom English is an Additional Language. For 1999–2000, individual allocations mirrored Section 11 allocations in 1998–99.

For 2000–01, £162.5 million will be available to local education authorities to improve the attainment of ethnic minority, traveller and refugee pupils, an increase of 7 per cent. on the amount available for the same purposes in 1999–2000. Provisional allocations for the newly merged Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Grant for 2000–01 were announced in October 1999. The formula used to allocate the ethnic minority achievement element of the Grant protected each authority's total Grant in 1999–2000, while distributing additional funds on the basis of need.

Details of individual allocations are set out in the table:

£

Local education authority	*Grant 1999–2000* [1]	*2000–01* [2]
Middlesbrough	454,607	[3]454,607
Stockton	195,418	195,418
Hartlepool	21,221	23,722
Redcar and Cleveland	45,320	45,320

[1] In order to compare allocations for the two years, the adult education element funded through EMAG in 1999–2000 as an interim measure has been deducted from each LEA's provisional allocation for 1999–2000.

[2] Provisional

[3] In order to compare allocations for the two years, the Traveller element has been deducted from Middlesbrough's provisional allocation for 2000–01.

Students

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce an individual student tracking system for measuring students' progress through the qualification system. [102500]

Mr. Wicks: The Department is currently undertaking technical feasibility studies for the creation of a statistical database to track young people's progress through the education and training system and their qualification achievements from the ages of 14 to 21. If these studies are successful we would expect to start development of the database in the first half of next year.

Further and Higher Education Funding

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the final costs of further education delivery was accounted for by staffing costs in the most recent year for which information is available. [102463]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* In 1997–98, 62.5 per cent. of the costs of delivering further education provision by colleges was accounted for by staffing costs.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of further education revenues was raised by user charges in the most recent year for which information is available. [102468]

Mr. Wicks: For the 1997–98 academic year, from available college data, 8 per cent. of college revenue came from tuition fees.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportions of higher education revenues were derived from *(a)* publicly financed student fees, *(b)* privately financed student fees, *(c)* block grant HEFCE funding, *(d)* contract funding, *(e)* selective research grant funding, *(f)* charitable funds and *(g)* other sources of finance, in the most recent year for which information is available. [102467]

Mr. Wicks: The following table shows the available figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for total income to UK higher education institutions in 1997–98. The HESA figures do not separately identify publicly and privately financed fees. However, figures from the funding letter issued to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) by the Secretary of State on 23 November show estimated tuition fee income to English institutions in respect of home and other EU domiciled full-time students in 1999–2000 as £243 million through private contributions and £561 million from public sources.

Income of higher education institutions in the UK 1997–98

Category of income	*£ million*	*Percentage*
Academic fees[1]	2,485	21
Block grant HEFCE funding[2]	4,508	39

Income of higher education institutions in the UK 1997–98

Category of income	*£ million*	*Percentage*
Contract funding[3]	1,134	10
Selective research grant[4]	555	5
Charitable funds	399	3
Other sources of finance[5]	2,536	22
Total income	11,617	100

[1] Includes full-time HE course fees and part-time credit bearing HE course fees.

[2] Includes recurrent, capital and special initiative HE grants and some research funding.

[3] Includes contracts from central and local government, UK industry and commerce, and EU and other overseas sources.

[4] Includes grants from OST Research Councils and research training support grants.

[5] Includes Other Operating Income, Endowment Income and Interest Receivable.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the total value was of student loans paid in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99. [102879]

Mr. Wicks: In the 1996–97 academic year, the total value of student loans paid was £877.2 million; in 1997–98 academic year £941 million; and in 1998–99 academic year £1,233 million.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the resource cost of student loans in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99. [102884]

Mr. Wicks: The resource cost for student loans was £369 million in 1997–98 and an estimated £440 million in 1998–99.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if public Further Education Colleges have access to the New Opportunities Fund. [102469]

Mr. Wicks: Further Education Colleges can apply to the New Opportunities Fund's existing programmes, usually in partnership with other organisations.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what safeguards he will introduce to damp any changes in the funding of Further Education Colleges consequent on the transition from the FEFC to the Learning and Skills Council. [102471]

Mr. Wicks: The Government recognise the importance, not only to colleges, but to all providers of education and training, of stable funding arrangements, particularly during the transition to the Learning and Skills Council. Transition issues will be addressed in the post-16 consultation document on funding, which will be published shortly inviting partners' views on this issue.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those further education colleges which have received accredited college status; and what further arrangements will apply for the maintenance of this status and its extension to other colleges. [102470]

Mr. Wicks: The following colleges have received accredited status:

Knowsley Community College

Blackpool and the Fylde College

Havering College of Further and Higher Education

Greenhead Sixth Form College

Bishop Burton College

John Leggott Sixth Form College

St. Charles Catholic Sixth Form College

South Cheshire College

Stephenson College

Strode College

Trowbridge College

Worthing Sixth Form College.

The introduction of accredited status has enabled the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) to recognise all-round competence in college performance. The criteria for accreditation are demanding, and colleges that fulfil them must demonstrate continuing commitment to the achievement of high standards across the range of their activity. The FEFC national accreditation panel will continue to meet to consider further applications from colleges in the period until April 2001. There will be consultations early next year on post-16 quality assurance arrangements after April 2001.

Truancy (Newcastle)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of reports of parents of children who persistently play truant from Firfield School, Newcastle, being persuaded to sign documents saying that the children are being educated at home when home education is not being provided. [102981]

Jacqui Smith: We are aware of the reports of the alleged action taken by Firfield Community School concerning persistent truants. Officials are investigating these matters and I will write to the hon. Member once I have examined their findings.

Exclusions

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each local education authority in the North West Region, *(a)* the average number of pupils excluded from school and the percentage of pupils this figure represents and *(b)* the number of full-time equivalent education welfare officers employed by each local education authority in each of the past five years. [102882]

Jacqui Smith: The information available is shown in the tables.

Information on the number of education welfare officers employed by local education authorities is not held centrally.

Number and percentage of permanent exclusions in maintained primary, secondary and special schools by Local Education Authority area in the North West Government Office Region: England 1995–96 to 1998–99
Position as at January of each academic year

1995–96

	Primary		Secondary		Special [1]		Total	
	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]
North West	225	0.04	1,243	0.37	62	0.54	1,530	0.17
Cheshire [3]	38	0.04	155	0.24	14	0.77	207	0.13
Halton [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Warrington [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Cheshire [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Cumbria	15	0.03	91	0.28	0	0.00	106	0.14
Bolton	7	0.02	80	0.46	0	0.00	87	0.19
Bury	11	0.06	65	0.60	1	0.36	77	0.26
Manchester	34	0.07	173	0.79	9	0.60	216	0.31
Oldham	8	0.03	64	0.38	4	0.71	76	0.18
Rochdale	6	0.03	37	0.28	4	0.80	47	0.13
Salford	21	0.09	79	0.66	3	0.71	103	0.28
Stockport	8	0.03	58	0.37	4	0.55	70	0.16
Tameside	9	0.04	59	0.42	0	0.00	68	0.18
Trafford	8	0.04	25	0.19	1	0.24	34	0.10
Wigan	15	0.05	54	0.27	4	0.43	73	0.14
Lancashire [3]	45	0.03	303	0.35	18	0.57	366	0.16
Blackburn with Darwen [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Blackpool [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Lancashire [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—

Position as at January of each academic year

1996–97

	Primary		Secondary		Special [1]		Total	
	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]
North West	188	0.03	1,268	0.37	77	0.66	1,533	0.17
Cheshire [3]	29	0.03	144	0.22	14	0.78	187	0.12
Halton [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Warrington [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Cheshire [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Cumbria	9	0.02	99	0.31	1	0.36	109	0.14
Bolton	17	0.06	80	0.45	3	0.58	100	0.21
Bury	9	0.05	57	0.51	2	0.80	68	0.23
Manchester	26	0.06	151	0.68	14	0.96	191	0.27
Oldham	7	0.03	59	0.35	1	0.19	67	0.16
Rochdale	5	0.02	42	0.32	1	0.19	48	0.13
Salford	9	0.04	92	0.76	1	0.17	102	0.28
Stockport	7	0.03	57	0.36	7	1.00	71	0.16
Tameside	10	0.04	52	0.37	0	0.00	62	0.16
Trafford	10	0.05	24	0.18	0	0.00	34	0.10
Wigan	8	0.03	58	0.29	11	1.14	77	0.15
Lancashire [3]	42	0.03	353	0.40	22	0.72	417	0.18
Blackburn with Darwen [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Blackpool [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Lancashire [4]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—

Position as at January of each academic year

1997–98

	Primary		Secondary		Special [1]		Total	
	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]	Number of exclusions	Percentage [2]
North West	207	0.04	1,182	0.34	68	0.59	1,457	0.16
Cheshire [3]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Halton [4]	2	0.02	21	0.24	0	0.00	23	0.11
Warrington [4]	3	0.02	23	0.18	6	1.65	32	0.10
Cheshire [4]	23	0.04	81	0.18	8	0.73	112	0.10

Position as at January of each academic year

	1997–98							
	Primary		*Secondary*		*Special*[1]		*Total*	
	Number of exclusions	*Percentage*[2]	*Number of exclusions*	*Percentage*[2]	*Number of exclusions*	*Percentage*[2]	*Number of exclusions*	*Percentage*[2]
Cumbria	8	0.02	92	0.28	0	0.00	100	0.13
Bolton	10	0.04	73	0.40	3	0.59	86	0.18
Bury	3	0.02	49	0.44	0	0.00	52	0.18
Manchester	45	0.10	146	0.65	7	0.48	198	0.28
Oldham	9	0.04	60	0.36	2	0.38	71	0.17
Rochdale	3	0.01	23	0.17	3	0.57	29	0.08
Salford	10	0.04	82	0.68	1	0.17	93	0.26
Stockport	11	0.04	54	0.34	1	0.15	66	0.15
Tameside	10	0.04	62	0.43	1	0.22	73	0.19
Trafford	3	0.01	30	0.20	0	0.00	33	0.09
Wigan	14	0.05	61	0.30	11	1.15	86	0.17
Lancashire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Blackburn with Darwen[4]	6	0.04	49	0.51	7	1.37	62	0.24
Blackpool[4]	4	0.03	36	0.52	0	0.00	40	0.20
Lancashire[4]	43	0.04	240	0.33	18	0.80	301	0.17

[1] Includes maintained and non maintained special schools
[2] The number of permanent exclusions expressed as a percentage of the number (headcount) of full and part-time pupils of all ages in primary, secondary and special schools, excluding dually registered pupils in special schools in January of each year
[3] Local Education Authority areas prior to 1 April 1998 before Local Government Reorganisation
[4] New Local Education Authority areas from 1 April 1998 after Local Government Reorganisation
[5] Not applicable

Student Support

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the support that will be available to students in England and Wales in the academic year 2000–01. [103368]

Mr. Wicks: The total level of support available to students in 2000–01 will be 2½ per cent. higher than for 1999–2000, in line with forecast price increases. I am today placing a memorandum in the Library giving details of the new loan, grant and fee rates for 2000–01. These rates will be incorporated in the Education (Student Support) Regulations, which cover support for eligible students under the current arrangements, and in the Education (Mandatory Awards) Regulations and Education (Student Loans) Amendment Regulations, which cover students who are still eligible for support under the previous arrangements. These Regulations will all be laid before Parliament in due course.

Job Creation (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for publishing the White Paper on the instrument adopted at the 86 session of the International Labour Conference concerning general conditions to stimulate job creation in small and medium-sized enterprises. [103370]

Ms Jowell: I have today published a White Paper entitled "International Labour Conference", copies of which have been placed in the Library.

TREASURY

Economic Imbalances (Regions)

16. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to address regional economic imbalances in the United Kingdom. [101780]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government are well aware of the importance of balanced economic growth across all the regions of the UK. We are working to diminish regional imbalances and so enhance the UK's economic performance, release economic potential and ensure that all our people share in steadily rising prosperity.

Taxation

17. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the additional tax that will be paid between 1997 and 2001 as a result of his Budget measures since 1997. [101781]

20. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the net addition is to the amount of tax that will be paid in the next financial year as a result of his Budget measures since 1997. [101784]

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the *(a)* total increase in tax due as a result of increases in taxes and *(b)* reduction in tax due as a result of reductions in taxes, aggregated over the measures in his three Budgets to date. [101790]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Details of the Budget measures can be found in tables 2.2, 1.3 and 1.3 of the July 1997, March 1998 and March 1999 Budget Reports. As a result of these Budgets, the direct tax rate on an average family with children will fall below 20 per cent. for the first time since 1979, and be at its lowest level since 1972.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent appraisals he has commissioned into changes in the system of taxation. [101786]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are committed to the thorough review of all tax measures.

Public Service Agreements

18. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to introduce Public Service Agreements with regional performance targets. [101782]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The new Public Service Agreements will be drawn up as part of next year's spending review, and will include some cross-departmental targets. The regional and local impact of Government programmes will be carefully considered in the course of the review.

Pensioner Incomes

19. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what effect the recently announced reduced rate of tax on savings will have on pensioner incomes in the south-west; and if he will make a statement. [101783]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Approximately 170,000 pensioners in the South West will benefit, by an average of about £70 a year, from the extension of the 10p starting rate of tax to savings income.

21. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the effect of the reduced rate of tax on savings announced in the Pre-Budget report on pensioner incomes in Yorkshire and the Humber. [101785]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Approximately 120,000 pensioners in Yorkshire and the Humber will benefit, by an average of about £70 a year, from the extension of the 10p starting rate of tax to savings income.

30. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact of the reduction in tax on savings on pensioner incomes in London. [101795]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Approximately 130,000 pensioners in London will benefit, by an average of about £60 a year, from the extension of the 10p starting rate of tax to savings income.

34. **Mrs. Brinton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of his economic policies on pensioner poverty. [101799]

36. **Mr. Patrick Hall:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the Government's economic policies on relieving pensioner poverty. [101801]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government have introduced a series of measures to combat pensioner poverty:

The Minimum Income Guarantee for the poorest pensioners, which was introduced in April 1999, will be uprated by earnings over time and as resources allow. The Government have already pledged to uprate the Minimum Income Guarantee by earnings every year until the end of this Parliament. This will benefit the 1.6 million MIG recipients. The effect of earnings uprating is that, from April 2000, for a younger single pensioner, the MIG will be almost £500 per year higher than it was in April 1997. For a pensioner couple, the MIG will be £800 higher.

The Winter Allowance—introduced by this Government in 1998 and increased to £100 for every pensioner household from winter 1999—is a major part of the Government's strategy to combat fuel poverty, along with the cut in the rate of VAT on fuel from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent.

Free TV licences for pensioners aged 75 and over will be introduced from autumn 2000. This measure is an important income boost for some of the poorest pensioner households.

On taxation, this Government have introduced the 10p and 22p tax bands, increased personal allowances for pensioners and ensured that the 10p rate applies to savings income. These changes benefit pensioners particularly and mean that two thirds of pensioners now pay no income tax at all.

Taken together, the average pensioner household will be £300 per year better off as a result of these measures. In addition, the Government's success in delivering low inflation is particularly important for pensioners who may be relying on savings for their income.

Give-as-you-earn Scheme

24. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to modify the regulations governing the give-as-you-earn scheme. [101788]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Changes to the legislation giving tax relief for charitable donations through the Payroll Giving scheme will be brought forward in next year's Finance Bill and by amendment of The Charitable Deductions (Approved Schemes) Regulations 1986.

The changes, which were announced in the Pre-Budget Report, will: remove the ceiling on the annual amount which may be donated under the Payroll Giving scheme; provide a time-limited 10 per cent. supplement on all Payroll Giving donations for three years from 6 April 2000, and tighten the rules for the time within which Payroll Giving agencies must distribute donations to the charities nominated by donors.

Economic and Monetary Union

25. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made towards meeting his economic tests for UK membership of the euro. [101789]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The assessment of the five economic tests published by the Treasury in October 1997 concluded that we need a period of stability and settled convergence before membership of the single currency can be considered.

Employment

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of his macroeconomic policies on levels of employment and unemployment in the north-west region. [101791]

Miss Melanie Johnson: In the North West region, as in the rest of the UK, we have created a sound and credible platform of economic stability that will help us attain our objective of high and stable levels of growth

and employment. Since the election, employment in the North West has risen by 71,000 and unemployment has fallen by 34,000, both broadly in line with UK trends.

39. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his assessment is of the impact of his macroeconomic policies on levels of employment and unemployment in Yorkshire and the Humber region. [101804]

Miss Melanie Johnson: In Yorkshire and Humberside, as in the rest of the UK, we have created a sound and credible platform of economic stability that will help us attain our objective of high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the election, employment in Yorkshire and Humberside has risen by 88,000, and unemployment has fallen by 44,000, both broadly in line with UK trends.

Income Tax (Personal Allowances)

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on personal allowances; and if he will make a statement. [101792]

Dawn Primarolo: Every individual has their own income tax personal allowance. In his pre-Budget report on 9 November this year, the Chancellor announced that the personal allowance for people aged under 65 would be increased to £4,385 in 2000–01, in line with indexation. The alignment of the income tax personal allowance and the starting point for employers' NICs means that the level of both now needs to be announced in the Autumn. The Government keep all income tax allowances under review, and any other changes will be announced in the Budget in the usual way.

Working Families Tax Credit

28. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in the north-west have used the working families tax credit response line to establish that they are eligible for the working families tax credit. [101793]

Dawn Primarolo: The response line for the Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Person's Tax Credit had handled 780,000 inquiries nationally up to 30 November. A breakdown by Government Office Region is not readily available. A breakdown by TV region is given in the table.

Television region	*Number of inquiries*
Grampian	14,000
Scottish	44,000
Border	7,000
Tyne	35,000
Yorkshire	68,000
Granada	89,000
Central	120,000
Anglia	42,000
HTV	51,000
Westcountry	21,000
Meridian	53,000
Carlton	107,000
Ulster	18,000
Not known	111,000
Total	780,000

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of people in Harlow who will be eligible for the working families tax credit. [101787]

Dawn Primarolo: Based on known Family Credit figures for Harlow, and expected eligibility nationally for Working Families Tax Credit, the estimated numbers of families which may be eligible for Working Families Tax Credit on this basis in Harlow is 1,900.

Regulation

29. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list *(a)* the number of new regulations on business made by his Department since May 1997 and *(b)* the number repealed. [101794]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government always take account of the impact of regulation on business. Our policies are helping to ensure sustainable economic growth which benefits all members of society.

Currency Speculation

31. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received recently concerning the taxation of international currency speculation; and if he will make a statement. [101796]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Since the beginning of the year, the Treasury has received 19 letters and 603 postcards from members of the public and 42 letters from hon. Members about the proposal to introduce a tax on currency speculation.

The Government believe the idea of a tax on currency speculation is, in principle, interesting, but has a number of practical drawbacks. It would be almost impossible to achieve global coverage, and there would be huge scope for avoidance.

Professional Football Clubs (Taxation)

32. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce a tax redistribution arrangement based on turnover for professional football clubs. [101797]

Dawn Primarolo: The football authorities, which are independent of Government, are best placed to make decisions on the development of football, including the distribution of income within the game. The tax system is not an appropriate mechanism for redistributing funds between football clubs.

Energy-saving Materials (VAT)

33. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he has made with his discussions with the EU on lowering VAT on all energy-saving materials. [101798]

Dawn Primarolo: I wrote to the Commission in September 1998 to suggest changes to current Community law to allow a reduced rate to apply to a wider range of energy saving materials, particularly those purchased for DIY use.

The Commission replied at the beginning of December last year, saying that there is currently no provision which would allow for this reduced rate. They raised the possibility of future Commission proposals relating to Annexe H of the EC Sixth Directive, which allows for reduced rates, and maintain that these proposals would provide the right context in which to tackle the energy saving materials question. We believe that the Commission may put forward these proposals next year and, when they arrive, we will consider again the case for a reduced rate for energy saving materials.

Anti-drugs Strategy

35. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he has taken to assist the implementation of the Government's anti-drugs misuse strategy. [101800]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Comprehensive Spending Review backed the Strategy set out in "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain" with £217 million of new money over the three years 1999–2000 to 2001–02. This includes funding for the Drug Treatment and Testing Orders, which, subject to successful evaluation, will roll out nationally from next year. In addition, my predecessor agreed a framework for the new Confiscated Assets Fund, which will ensure that the assets seized from drugs barons are deployed effectively in support of the Strategy.

Further, HM Customs and Excise, who are accountable to the Chancellor, play a key operational role in delivery against the Strategy's objective of reducing the availability of drugs in the UK.

EU Tax Competition

37. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the damage to the British economy of unfair tax competition within the European Union. [101802]

Dawn Primarolo: Unfair tax competition in the form of harmful and discriminatory tax practices can distort competition and artificially attract investment and jobs away from member states, such as the UK, which have more neutral tax systems. Unfair tax practices of others prevent British business from operating on a more level playing field.

Monetary Policy Framework

38. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the new monetary policy framework he introduced in May 1997. [101803]

Mr. Andrew Smith: As set out in the Pre-Budget Report, and in a Treasury paper, "The New Monetary Policy Framework", the Government believe that the new monetary policy framework has had several beneficial effects on the UK economy. Since its introduction, inflation has been low, stable and close to target, with survey and financial market data suggesting that price stability is expected to be maintained. This has contributed to overall economic stability, steady growth, and rising employment.

Business Rates

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 289W, on business rates, what his estimate is of the total amount to be collected in rates in England in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01; and what multiplier for inflation he used to calculate the real-terms difference between the two figures. [102813]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) on 9 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 604–06W.

The calculation of the national rate multiplier (or poundage) is set out in the Local Government Finance Act 1988, which specifies the retail prices index for the preceding September. The multiplier for 2000–01 allows for 1.1 per cent. inflation, based on September 1999 RPI.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100152]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The information requested would be available only at a disproportionate cost.

Child Poverty

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which of the indicators listed in Opportunity for All are being used for judging the achievement of the Government's aim to *(a)* halve child poverty within 10 years and *(b)* eliminate child poverty within 20 years. [102997]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Prime Minister to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 486W.

Correspondence

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to the letter sent to him on 27 April by the right hon. Member for Wells about the European budget rebate, about which reminders were sent on 2 July, 21 July, 9 September, 8 October and 8 December. [102984]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The former Chief Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) wrote to the right hon. Gentleman on 4 October 1999.

NIRS2

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many items of data were inputed on to national insurance records held on the NIRS2 computer system in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 to date. [102795]

Dawn Primarolo: Small amounts of data were inputed to National Insurance records held on NIRS2 from 28 January to 18 June 1998. From 13 July 1998, input of data increased incrementally as additional parts of the NIRS2 system were implemented.

I regret that the full and complete information requested for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is not available.

The largest single source of data for inputting to records held on NIRS2 is the annual National Insurance update received from employers. The vast majority of this data is inputed to records during the tax year following the year it is collected. Inputting to NIRS2 started at the end of August 1998 and the following volumes of data have been inputted so far: for the 1997–98 tax year, 45.1 million items; for the 1998–99 tax year, 46.4 million items.

The main daily inputs to records held on NIRS2 in terms of volume have been estimated from samples taken in November 1999 and December 1999. The average is:

	Per day
External inputs	214,000
Transactions processed	1,964,000
On-line Inputs	251,300
Update of contribution information from employers	199,000

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years; [98688]

(2) how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years; [98687]

(3) how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98686]

Miss Melanie Johnson: For information on civil servants' transport costs, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to her by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 255–56W. Travel undertaken by civil servants (including use of cars) complies with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code.

The Treasury always provides ministerial vehicles for official purposes. However, if Ministers prefer to use their own vehicles for official business, they will be able to claim mileage allowance in the same circumstances and on the same terms as civil servants in the Minister's Department.

The standard and public transport motor mileage rates the Department offers to civil servants is:

i. Standard rate of Mileage Allowance:

Paid for journeys where public transport is not reasonably practicable and the claimant holds a fully comprehensive insurance policy.

Pence

	Up to 1500cc	*1501–2000cc*	*Over 2000cc*
First 5,000 miles at	35.7	40	43
Over 5,000 miles at	17	21	27

ii. Public Transport Rate of Mileage Allowance:

Paid in other circumstances

Rate per mile 22.36p

Cost of each of the last five years:

	£
1994–95[1]	21,000
1995–96[1]	12,000
1996–97[1]	7,000
1997–98	6,000
1998–99	11,000

[1] Includes the cost of car hire

Ministerial transport is provided by the Government Car Service (GCS). For information on spend on the Government Car Service, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to her by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 255–56W.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the total work force in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102726]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Current records show that about 12.7 per cent. of staff in the Treasury, 6.8 per cent. of staff in Customs and 6.3 per cent. of staff in Inland Revenue have self-declared themselves as of ethnic minority origin.

Each Department has a variety of measures in place to ensure equal treatment for people of ethnic minority origin, and to ensure that they meet their legal obligations to protect people of ethnic minority from discrimination in the field of employment.

EU Structural Funds (Wales)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the total amount of PES cover required over the period of nine years from 2000 in respect of the Objective 1 funding available for Wales over that period. [102969]

Mr. Andrew Smith: West Wales and the Valleys has been allocated a total of 1,788 million euros under Objective 1.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of the total work force in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102730]

Mr. Lock: As at 30 September 1999, 9.3 per cent. of staff in my Department (including Associated Offices, Court Service and Public Trust Office), who had completed a questionnaire, were of an ethnic minority origin. If all the staff who did not make a declaration were white, the figure would be 8.9 per cent.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office set out in her reply the corporate action being taken to encourage the employment of people from ethnic minorities. In this Department we provide sponsorship for undergraduates of ethnic minority origin each year under the Windsor Fellowship scheme. We also provide sponsorship and mentors annually for the National Mentoring Consortium, which brings professionals together with students of African, Caribbean and Asian origin to offer expertise, experience and support, as well as contributing to the Department's efforts to attract high calibre staff of ethnic minority origin. An officer has recently been appointed to develop interchange, outreach and recruitment; to take forward key aspects of the Modernising Government agenda; and generally increase the Department's profile at recruitment fairs and among potential ethnic minority recruitees.

We have recently appointed an Equality and Diversity Adviser to provide guidance on all aspects of the application of equal opportunities across the Department and its business. Furthermore, in response to the Report into the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, we are conducting a wide-ranging audit of all our policies and procedures, including recruitment. The Equality Audit will be making its recommendations in January.

WALES

Devolution

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans Her Majesty's Government have for further devolution of power to Wales. [101965]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None. Our aim is to make sure that the settlement we have under the Government of Wales Act 1998 operates smoothly and for the good of the people of Wales.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what meeting he has held in the last three months with Ministers from the Treasury to discuss Objective 1 match funding for Wales. [102168]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have had a number of meetings and discussions with Treasury colleagues when we have discussed Objective 1 funding.

We have also arranged for officials at the Treasury to work with officials from my Department, and the National Assembly, to look at the issues of Objective 1 funding as preparation for the next Spending Review, which is due to get under way in the new year.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales to which countries he has paid official visits since 1 July. [102869]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In my capacity as Secretary of State for Wales, I have made one official visit abroad, to Belgium.

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102040]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department has a staff of 37 and none are registered as disabled.

However, my Department has an Equal Opportunities policy that all eligible people should have equality of opportunity for employment and advancement on the basis of their ability, qualifications and suitability for work. This means that no job applicant or employee will receive less favourable treatment on the grounds of disability.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102365]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Notes of meetings are taken and kept in Departmental records.

Theatres (Funding)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning Arts Council of Wales funding for Gwent Theatre. [100205]

Mr. Hanson: We have received a number of representations. I have written to National Assembly Secretary, Tom Middlehurst, to pass on to him the concerns raised.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to meet the First Secretary of the National Assembly to discuss the future funding of Gwent Theatre, Theatre Powys and Theatre Clwyd. [100204]

Mr. Hanson: The Secretary of State meets the First Secretary on a regular basis to discuss a range of issues; and they have discussed this issue in detail. Following the Adjournment Debate from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) further discussions have been held with the relevant Assembly Secretary.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102335]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There is one small building under my Department's control which accommodates 37 staff. There is insufficient accommodation to set aside dedicated rooms for any of these uses. Smoking is restricted to one room by agreement with the non-smokers who must also use it.

Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of *(a)* non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* task forces in Wales (i) on 1 May 1997, (ii) on 1 May 1998 and (iii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [102487]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The number of non-departmental public bodies was 45 at 1 May 1997, 42 at 1 May 1998, and 37 at 30 June 1999. From 1 July 1999, responsibility for those 37 non-departmental public bodies transferred to the National Assembly for Wales.

Information is not held centrally on the number of task forces in Wales, but one new task force was established in the summer of 1997, and a further task force was established in the summer of 1998. Existing task forces became the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales from 1 July 1999.

HEALTH

Nursing and Residential Homes

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that local authorities abide by the requirements of the Competition Act 1998 as it affects their purchasing role in relation to private nursing and residential homes. [99051]

Mr. Hutton: Until there is a body of case law, it is not clear whether, or to what extent, the Competition Act applies to local authorities.

In the White Paper "Modernising Social Services", we made clear that decisions about the provision of care services should be based entirely on judgments about best value and optimum outcomes for individual users. We have a number of measures in place to ensure that the commissioning of services is undertaken in this way. These include best value service reviews and joint reviews by the Audit Commission and the Department's social services inspectorate.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of sufferers of secondary progressive multiple sclerosis live in areas where the relevant health authority will not pay for Beta-Interferon for them. [99993]

Ms Stuart: Information about health authorities' policies on the treatment of multiple sclerosis is not available centrally. Any such policies should provide for individual cases to be considered on their merits in the light of the evidence available on different forms of treatment.

Dental Services

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria he is using for selection of the pilot areas for the NHS Phone and Go dental access areas; and if Northamptonshire Health Authority meets them. [101489]

Mr. Hutton: The key criterion for the selection of Phone and Go dental access centres is that there must be a demonstrated problem of access to National Health Service dentistry in the area. This is assessed from several sources of availability information, including health authority reports, statistical indicators and knowledge of the individual health authority's dental needs and health. The schemes must also offer good value for money, provide a full range of general dental services and have both regional office support and health authority commitment and capability to deliver. Northamptonshire was middle ranking in terms of reported dental availability problems.

Haemophiliacs (Hepatitis C)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will compensate those haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C through contaminated blood products; and if he will make a statement. [102118]

Mr. Denham: It remains our policy that compensation or other financial help to patients is given only when the National Health Service has been at fault. We do not believe we should make an exception to that general rule in the case of people with haemophilia infected with hepatitis C.

Heroin Addicts

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of heroin addicts in Great Britain received rehabilitation treatment in each of the past five years; and what estimate he has made of the numbers who will receive rehabilitation in the next five years. [101977]

Yvette Cooper: Information on the number of heroin addicts in Great Britain is no longer collected centrally. Data for the last five years for which data were collected (1992–96) are in Table 1.

The regional drug misuse databases record drug users presenting to treatment agencies in Great Britain, in six-monthly periods. Table 2 shows the number of those users with heroin as their main drug of misuse for the period 30 September 1993 to 30 September 1998.

A key performance target set in the first annual report and national plan of the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator is to

> "increase the participation of problem drug misusers, including prisoners, in drug treatment programmes which have a positive impact on health and crime by 100 per cent. by 2008; and by 66 per cent. by 2005".

The dataset collected by regional drug misuse databases is currently being reviewed to determine an appropriate baseline for this target.

Table 1: Addicts notified to Home Office during the years 1992 to 1996—United Kingdom

Year	*Number of notified addicts*
1992	16,964
1993	18,919
1994	22,313
1995	24,530
1996	30,573

Source:

Statistical Bulletin—"Statistics of Drug Addicts Notified to the Home Office, United Kingdom, 1996"

Table 2: Users starting agency episodes in Great Britain with heroin as their main drug of misuse, in the six-month periods ending 30 September 1993 to 30 September 1998—Great Britain

Six-month period ending	*Number of users*
September 1993	8,643
March 1994	9,746
September 1994	11,191
March 1995	12,282
September 1995	13,400
March 1996	14,488
September 1996	16,621
March 1997	18,285
September 1997	16,981
March 1998	16,390
September 1998	18,994

Source:

Statistical Bulletin—"Statistics from the Regional Drug Misuse Databases for the six months ending September 1998" and earlier bulletins.

Disablement Services

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning a national service framework for disablement services. [102344]

Mr. Denham: The charity consortium emPOWER have, over an extended period, called for the establishment of a national service framework (NSF) for disablement services. A rolling programme of NSFs, taking forward established frameworks on cancer and paediatric intensive care and developing frameworks for coronary heart disease and mental health, was launched in April 1998. The next two NSFs will be for older people (2000), and diabetes (2001).

Cervical Cancer

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the application of the HPV test in cervical cancer screening. [101970]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* An outline proposal on pilot studies using human papilloma virus testing as triage for mild and borderline smears, as recommended in the report of the National Health Service Health Technology Assessment published on 30 September 1999, was discussed at the National Screening Committee's meeting in Belfast on 8 December 1999. The National Screening Committee will advise Ministers in light of these discussions. A statement will be made once we have had time to assess this advice.

NHS Direct

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) of the people using NHS Direct, since it began, in Colne Valley constituency or other similar local areas for which figures are kept, how many *(a)* were referred to hospital, *(b)* were referred to their GP and *(c)* received other advice; [102233]

(2) how many people in Colne Valley constituency, South Kirklees Primary Care Group area or other similar locality for which records are kept have used NHS Direct since it began. [102234]

Ms Stuart: Between April and October this year, NHS Direct West Yorkshire handled over 65,000 calls. The current systems are unable to report information at constituency, primary care group or health authority level, except for calls received via the general practitioner co-operative.

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of NHS Direct on other local health services in the Colne Valley constituency, South Kirklees Primary Care Group area or other similar local areas. [102232]

Ms Stuart: The Medical Research Unit of the University of Sheffield is undertaking an independent evaluation of NHS Direct. This evaluation will include a study of the outcomes from calls to NHS Direct. We expect the University of Sheffield's full and final report to be published early next year.

Abortion

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will draw up guidelines to ensure that all general practitioners with a conscientious objection to abortion are required to make such objection known within their publicity and advertising materials; [101931]

(2) if he will issue guidelines to all general practitioners explaining that if they are unwilling *(a)* to advise on and *(b)* refer women for abortions they should help them make an appointment with another general practitioner who is willing to refer them to a hospital or agency for NHS treatment. [101932]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* In 1991 the General Medical Services Council of the British Medical Association issued guidance to general practitioners through local medical committees, reminding them of their obligations under their terms of service. That guidance remains extant and GPs who have a conscientious objection to abortion should refer the patient to another doctor as soon as possible. GPs who fail to do this could be alleged to be in breach of their terms of service.

Earlier this year regional directors were asked to ensure that primary care groups have arrangements in place so that women considering an abortion are able to have easy access to a GP who can make a referral where appropriate.

A doctor is not required to make known on a practice leaflet a conscientious objection to abortion or any other treatment.

Physiotherapists

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many physiotherapists have been employed by the NHS through agencies in the last five years; and what steps he has taken to reduce expenditure in this area. [102692]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

High-security Hospitals (Staff Vacancies)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are currently in high-security hospitals for *(a)* nurses, *(b)* nursing assistants, *(c)* occupational therapists, *(d)* forensic psychologists and *(e)* psychiatrists; and what the figures were in May. [102697]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Eastbourne Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in what capacity the immediate former chief executive of Eastbourne Hospitals NHS Trust is currently employed; where he is located; and what requirements he is presently being asked to meet. [102249]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* Following the resignation of the former chief executive of Eastbourne Hospitals National Health Service Trust it was agreed that he would continue to be employed by the NHS for a further six months, although not in a chief executive's role, and not at Eastbourne.

The former chief executive is therefore in discussion with the chief executive at Mid Kent Healthcare NHS Trust in Maidstone about a special project for up to six months.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress is being made with respect to the building of a new breast cancer unit at Nottingham City Hospital; and if he will make a statement; [102226]

(2) what discussions he has had with Trent Regional Health Authority about the proposed new breast cancer unit at Nottingham City Hospital. [102225]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* The National Health Service Executive Trent regional office has received an outline business case for a new breast care unit from Nottingham City Hospital NHS Trust. When the Department's capital allocations for 2000–01 are announced, this project will be considered along with other priorities.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research he has commissioned on the success rate for pre-operative diagnosis of breast cancer of the triple assessment method. [101983]

(2) what research he has commissioned on the success rate for pre-operative diagnosis of each of the following forms of assessment for breast cancer *(a)* clinical examination, *(b)* mammography or ultrasound and *(c)* fine needle aspiration or core biopsy. [101982]

(3) what percentage of breast cancer assessments are made by the use of the triple assessment method; and if he will list the figures for each NHS trust. [101984]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* We fund health and medical research, including that for breast cancer, in a number of ways.

The Department funds research and development to support its work on policy development and evaluation in health and social care. The Department also manages the National Health Service research and development levy, which is used to support research and development of relevance to the National Health Service in hospitals, general practice and other health care settings, and to fund the NHS research and development programme. In addition, the Medical Research Council (MRC)—which receives most of its income via grant-in-aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—funds medical research as part of the Government's funding of the science and engineering base.

There is strong existing research evidence for the value of using the combination of clinical examination, mammography and fine needle aspiration cytology (FNAC) known as "triple assessment" to diagnose cancer in women with breast lesions. A review of 15 follow-up studies showed that triple assessment is consistently more sensitive than any single test alone, capable of picking up 95 per cent. to 100 per cent. of cancers when at least one component is positive. When all three tests give the same result, whether positive or negative, the probability that the diagnosis is correct is about 99 per cent. In most cases, therefore, women with three positive tests can be offered therapy and those whose tests are all negative can be reassured without the need for surgical biopsy. In addition, triple assessment can be carried out in a single visit, reducing the time to achieve a definitive diagnosis.

"Improving Outcomes in Breast Cancer" was issued in 1996 by the NHS Executive Headquarters to provide evidence-based guidance on commissioning breast cancer services in the NHS. This recommends the use of triple assessment. A synopsis of the research evidence underlying the guidance was published alongside the guidance. Copies of both documents are available in the Library. We have invested an additional £30 million since 1997–98 to improve breast cancer services, building on this guidance.

Information on the use of triple assessment is not collected centrally.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Government will publish their response to the Science and Technology Committee's report on the Scientific Advisory System: Mobile Phones and Health, HC (1998–99) 489. [103537]

Yvette Cooper: The Government response to the Committee will be laid before the House tomorrow. Copies will be placed in the Library.

Contract Nursing

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the NHS paid for non-NHS nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff in 1998–99 in *(a)* England and *(b)* each NHS region. [102880]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 20 December 1999

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Mitrokhin Archive

Valerie Davey: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement concerning the consideration by the Crown Prosecution Service of the five cases covering the Mitrokhin archive and related matters which were referred to by the Home Secretary in his oral statement of 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 587–99. [103901]

The Solicitor-General: In his statement of 21 October, the Home Secretary informed the House that, in the light of Mrs. Melita Norwood's recent statements, the papers in her case were being studied again by the prosecuting authorities. He also stated that four other cases were being considered. Those cases included those of Robin Pearson and John Symonds.

I can now inform the House that the CPS has decided not to refer the papers in any of the five cases to the police for investigation. The reason in each instance is the same, namely, that sufficient is known about the case to make it clear that any prosecution would fail. Having reached that view, it would be quite wrong for the CPS to ask the police to undertake a criminal investigation.

In the case of Mrs. Norwood, the intelligence information about her case would not be admissible as evidence; her statements to the media would probably be ruled to be inadmissible as evidence; there is little prospect of obtaining admissible evidence; and in any event any prosecution would probably be stayed on the ground of abuse of process. Similar considerations apply to the case of Mr. Pearson. In the case of Mr. Symonds, an immunity, granted by the DPP's office in 1984 in connection with inquiries into other matters, precludes a prosecution.

The Law Officers have been consulted about each case, and we agree with the conclusions reached by the CPS. Each decision has been made only after careful and detailed consideration.

It is not usual for the Law Officers to make announcements concerning their consideration of individual criminal cases. The rationale for this is straightforward. If it is considered that there is a case against an individual, and the public interest is in favour of a prosecution, then the proper course is to put the facts before the court and let justice take its course. If it is considered that there is no case against an individual, or the public interest is against a prosecution, then to give publicity to that decision will inevitably draw attention to the individual, attention which he or she may not welcome and which will not often be deserved.

In this instance, a different course is being followed because the allegations against the three individuals named in this answer have been given extensive publicity, and not to name them could only prompt speculation about whether a case against them is still being considered.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Solicitors

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what other methods of consulting solicitors as part of the "secret soundings process" for applicants to the judiciary and for silk he proposes to adopt following the withdrawal by the Law Society and other solicitors' bodies from that process. [103581]

Mr. Lock: The arrangements for consultation on candidates for judicial and Queen's Counsel appointments do not in any way constitute a "secret soundings process". The identities of consultees are published. The arrangements are a system for obtaining assessments of candidates against the stated criteria for appointment, and were substantially endorsed by Sir Leonard Peach in his recent Report. The Lord Chancellor is disappointed that the Law Society decided to withdraw from the consultation process and did so before the publication of the Peach Report. In fairness to solicitor candidates the Lord Chancellor will continue to consult such representative bodies as the Solicitors' Family Law Association, the Solicitors Association of High Court Advocates and the London Criminal Courts Solicitors' Association. The Lord Chancellor also proposes to develop other channels of consultation, potentially including solicitors' firms, senior practitioners and local and regional Law Societies.

Child Abduction (Greece)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what discussions the Lord Chancellor's Department has had concerning the interpretation and application by Greek courts of Articles 7, 11, 16, 24 and 30 of the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. [103080]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department has no concerns about the interpretation and application of the 1980 Convention by the courts in Greece. As a result there have been no discussions on this topic between the Department and its counterpart in Greece, the Ministry of Justice. There have, of course, been discussions about particular cases, but these have not revealed any points of more general concern about the application of the Convention in the Greek courts.

Derbyshire Magistrates Courts

Mr. Todd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what value-for-money study has been made of the private finance initiative for Derbyshire magistrates courts; and if he will publish it. [102824]

Jane Kennedy: A Public Sector Comparator has been prepared and this value-for-money study will be used to evaluate the bids when they are received. I have no plans to publish this value-for-money study or details of the bids received due to their confidential nature.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100149]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* We have not let any science or technology research contracts over this period.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102326]

Mr. Battle: Following is the information:

	Rooms available for use by pregnant and nursing mothers	*Rooms for smokers*
Main Building London SW1	1	1
Old Admiralty Building London SW1[1]	2	1
1 Palace Street London SW1	1	2
8 Cleveland Row London SW1	0	0
1 Carlton Gardens London SW1	0	0
Cromwell House London SW1	1	1
20 Victoria Street London SW1	0	0
Apollo House Croydon	1	1
Hanslope Parks Bucks	[2]3	6

[1] Following refurbishment
[2] This figure includes a creche

There are no rooms set aside for ethnic minority religious use. Similar information in respect of the Overseas Estate, which comprises over 3,800 properties in 184 countries, is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

China

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chinese Government concerning *(a)* religious liberty in China and *(b)* the treatment of house church leaders in China. [102684]

Mr. Battle: We raise our concerns about freedom of religion in China during our regular high level bilateral human rights dialogue with the Chinese Government. This includes specific references to the treatment of house church leaders and followers of other religions on China. Freedom of religion was a particular focus of the last round of the dialogue held in September, which included a special session devoted to the subject of freedom of religious belief at which British and Chinese specialists exchanged views. The treatment of Falun Gong adherents was discussed during the State Visit and I raised this subject with the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister in November. I also made clear our concerns about the freedom of religious belief in Tibet, and raised individual cases.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the role of the British Government in encouraging China to continue its process of political reform. [102702]

Mr. Battle: Since 1979 China has been engaged on a programme of economic modernisation and reform. This has led to wide-ranging changes in the economic and social structures of the country and has resulted in impressive improvements in the living standards of the people. While the focus has been primarily on economic reform there have also been reforms in the political and legal areas, with moves beginning to take place towards the greater democratic supervision and participation in decision making. These have included the strengthening of the role of parliamentary type institutions such as the National and Local People's Congresses, the introduction of direct elections at the village level, and the building up and strengthening of a more effective legal and judicial system. We encourage these processes and want to see the human rights of Chinese citizens properly protected in accordance with the international Covenants which the Chinese have recently signed. We have developed a number of co-operative programmes and projects with the Chinese, especially in the legal and judicial fields, designed to help strengthen the rule of law in China. We also encourage parliamentary and other exchanges in order to expose China to the example of democratic institutions and practices.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to promote tourism in Britain by Chinese citizens. [102700]

Mr. Battle: China is not considered a large potential market for tourism to Britain in the short term. The British Tourist Authority are keeping this under review. We welcome the increasing number of Chinese visitors to this country, both business visitors and students, and hope that eventually the Chinese will be able to enjoy Britain's tourist resources.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress in China's observance of human rights after the UK and China's human rights dialogue in September. [102703]

Mr. Battle: The last round of the bilateral human rights dialogue with China produced some useful and frank discussions, particularly on the rule of law and the death penalty. We remain concerned about China's record over human rights. We continue to believe that a policy of dialogue, combined with practical programmes of co-operation in areas such as the law and the judicial system, is more likely to bring about improvements in China's practice over the longer term. We make regular representations on human rights. Both my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary discussed human rights with the Chinese during the State Visit. I had lengthy discussions on these subjects (including Tibet) with the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister during my visit to Beijing in November.

Angola

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department has taken to ensure that UN sanctions against UNITA in Angola are implemented effectively. [102492]

Mr. Hain: We fully support UN sanctions against UNITA, the work of the UN Sanctions Committee on Angola, chaired by Ambassador Fowler, and the Expert Panels, established to look at ways to tighten implementation of sanctions. We are contributing US$200,000 to the Panels' work.

We have also called for stricter enforcement of sanctions by all UN member states. We are investigating UNITA's re-supply routes and will pass on what we learn to Ambassador Fowler.

The UK fully implements UN sanctions decided upon by the Security Council of the United Nations in its resolutions 864 (1993), 1127 (1997) and 1173 (1998) by means of restrictions imposed in Orders in Council under the United Nations Act 1946, by an amendment to the Open General Import Licence in respect of diamonds and by other administrative means. We have recently frozen funds in the UK, in accordance with UNSCR 1173.

Information concerning potential breaches of sanctions by UK nationals or companies is passed immediately to the appropriate UK enforcement authorities.

Correspondence

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the hon. Member for Gosport will receive a full reply to his representations on behalf of Mr. O about UK entry clearance (Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit reference GV 100/54641). [102583]

Mr. Vaz: I shall be replying to the hon. Member's letter about Mr. Onyike in the next few days.

Hong Kong

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has, under the Joint Declaration, to monitor political structures and political activity in Hong Kong. [102910]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 110W.

Pakistan

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations the Government have made to the Government of Pakistan concerning the well-being of former ministers currently held in custody, pending trial. [102864]

Mr. Hain: From the outset we have urged Pakistan's military authorities to respect the safety and legal rights of those detained. We have also urged that former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his co-defendants be given a free, fair and transparent trial before a civilian court. Our High Commissioner in Islamabad reiterated those points when he saw General Musharraf on 15 November. I also underlined our concern to Sharifuddin Pirzada, a member of Pakistan's National Security Council, on 8 December.

Overseas Territories

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the legal position in each overseas territory in relation to *(a)* capital punishment and *(b)* homosexual acts. [102842]

Mr. Battle: *(a)* Capital punishment for murder has been abolished in all Overseas Territories (OT) save Bermuda, which announced in July of this year its intention to do so. Capital punishment for piracy and treason remains on the statute books of all OTs except BIOT, BAT and the Falkland Islands.

(b) There is currently legislation in Anguilla, Montserrat, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands which effectively makes homosexual acts between consenting adults in private a criminal offence. This is not the case in other OTs.

Kashmir

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the current situation in Kashmir. [103190]

Mr. Hain: Although the level of violence in Kashmir has reduced since the events of the summer, we remain concerned at reports of continuing incidents on and around the Line of Control. We continue to urge India and Pakistan to resume their bilateral dialogue on all outstanding issues, including Kashmir.

Iran

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Foreign Minister of Iran during his forthcoming visit to the UK on behalf of the 13 Jews detained without trial; and if he will make a statement. [103029]

Mr. Hain: Yes, as we have done at every opportunity. We remain very concerned about this, as the Iranian Government are only too well aware.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on current diplomatic relations with Iran. [103208]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary again met his Iranian counterpart Dr. Kharrazi at UNGA on 21 September. During this meeting they agreed to exchange visits. We hope that Dr. Kharrazi will visit early in the New Year and that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will visit Iran in the Spring.

We continue to look to co-operate with Iran in a number of practical fields and so develop the relationship to the benefit of both countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle) announced to the House on 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 32W, an assistance package to help Iran in their battle to stem the flow of drugs through Iran from Afghanistan. The Permanent Under-Secretary for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office also announced

during his visit to Tehran on 28 November that the Department for International Development have approved an assistance package for the large number of refugees in Iran, where for too long Iran has borne a heavy burden without international help.

Our policy, in line with that of our EU partners, remains to encourage the reforms already underway in Iran while pressing for improvements in those Iranian policies that are of concern.

European Union Council

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for December; and if he will list the major European Union events for the next six months. [103718]

Mr. Vaz: The information is as follows:

Monthly forecast of EU business: January 2000

No agendas for any of the January Councils are available yet.

European calendar: January-June 2000

This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
January		
14	Brussels	Fisheries Council
17–21	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
18	Brussels	Budget Council
24–25	Brussels	General Affairs Council
24–25	Brussels	Agriculture Council
28–29	Lisbon	Development Ministers (Informal)
31	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
February		
2–3	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
11–12	Lisbon	Social Affairs Council (Informal)
14–15	Brussels	General Affairs Council
14–18	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
21–22	Brussels	Agriculture Council
21–22	Vilamoura	EU/San Jose Ministerial
23–24	Vilamoura	EU/Rio Group Ministerial
28	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
March		
1–2	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
3–4	Lisbon	Justice and Home Affairs Council (Informal)
13	Brussels	Joint Social Affairs and ECOFIN Council
13–17	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
16	Brussels	Internal Market Council
20–21	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20–21	Brussels	Agriculture Council
23–24	Lisbon	Special European Council
27	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
28	Brussels	Transport Council
29–30	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
30	Brussels	Environment Council
April		
3	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
4	Luxembourg	Social Affairs Council
7–8	Lisbon	ECOFIN Council (Informal)
10–11	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
10–14	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
13	Luxembourg	Consumer Affairs Council
15–16	Oporto	Environment Council (Informal)
17–18	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
May 2000		
2	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
2	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
3–4	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
5–7	Sao Miguel, Azores	Informal Meeting of Foreign Ministers
11	Brussels	Health Council
15–16	Brussels	Agriculture Council
15–19	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
16	Brussels	Culture Council
18	Brussels	Industry Council
18	Brussels	Development Council
22–23	Brussels	General Affairs Council
25	Brussels	Internal Market Council
25–26	Lisbon	Euromed Foreign Ministers (Informal)
May		
28–30	Evora	Agriculture Council (Informal)
29–30	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
30	Brussels	Energy Council
June		
5	Luxembourg	ECOFIN Council
6	Luxembourg	Social Affairs Council
8	Luxembourg	Education Council
13–14	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
13–16	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
15	Luxembourg	Research Council
16	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
19–20	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
19–20	Sta. Maria da Feira	European Council
22–23	Luxembourg	Environment Council
26–27	Luxembourg	Transport Council

Terrorist Bombings

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have signed the UN Convention on the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings. [103231]

Mr. Battle: The following countries have signed the UN Convention on the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings:

Algeria
Argentina
Belarus
Austria
Belgium
Brazil
Burundi
Canada
Comoros
Costa Rica
Cote d'Ivoire
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Egypt
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Iceland
India
Ireland
Israel
Italy

Japan
Lithuania
Luxembourg
Madagascar
Monaco
Nepal
Netherlands
Norway
Panama
Philippines
Poland
Republic of Korea
Romania
Russian Federation
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain
Sri Lanka
Sudan
Sweden
Yugoslavia
Macedonia
Togo
Turkey
Turkmenistan
Uganda
United Kingdom
United States of America
Uruguay
Uzbekistan
Venezuela.

East Timorese Refugees

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress is being made with the process of returning East Timorese refugees living in West Timor. [103214]

Mr. Battle: We have repeatedly urged the Indonesian Government to accelerate the return of those displaced East Timorese who wish to return home. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has opened a processing centre in Kupang, West Timor for those wishing to return, and the International Organisation for Migration is handling repatriations. Over 120,000 have now returned.

Indonesia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts regarding the lifting of the EU embargo on arms sales to Indonesia. [103209]

Mr. Battle: EU Foreign Ministers reviewed recent events in Indonesia at the 15 November General Affairs Council (GAC). Indonesia was not on the agenda at the December GAC. The EU Common Position concerning restrictive measures against Indonesia adopted on 16 September expires on 17 January 2000. It would require the unanimous agreement of all EU partners either to lift it early or to extend it.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Sudan concerning President Omar Hassan al Bashir's decision to dissolve parliament and declare a state of emergency. [103217]

Mr. Hain: We have taken a number of opportunities to speak to the Government of Sudan about the decisions of President Bashir both bilaterally and with the EU stressing our concern for the safety of British citizens and the importance we attach to a comprehensive peace settlement that benefits all Sudanese.

The situation on the ground remains calm. We will continue to monitor events closely through our Embassy in Khartoum.

European Security and Defence Identity

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he is taking to ensure that in plans for the European Security and Defence Identity the views of the neutral and non-NATO nations are not able to prevent the rapid exercise of military judgment. [102087]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

There is no reason to believe that the non-NATO Members of the European Union will obstruct the rapid and effective exercise of military judgment in any future EU-led crisis management operation. Operations for territorial or collective defence will remain a matter for NATO.

Under the arrangements agreed at the recent Helsinki European Council, all EU member states will be entitled to participate on an equal basis in EU decision-making. Once a decision to launch an EU-led operation has been taken only countries contributing to the operation would participate in day-to-day decision-making.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the compensation paid to ex-coalminers or to their widows, on account of their suffering from emphysema or chronic bronchitis, will be liable to reduction on the basis of their receiving extra social security benefits *(a)* after giving up work and *(b)* for their loss of earnings. [103062]

Mr. Bayley: The provisions of the compensation recovery scheme applies to all victims of accident, injury or disease who have received both state benefits and compensation for the same need. The scheme will, therefore, apply to miners who have recently been awarded compensation for emphysema or chronic bronchitis. Under the provisions of the scheme, a compensator is liable to repay benefits paid up to the date of the final compensation payment, subject to a five year maximum. In turn, they must reduce the compensation to take account of the amounts repaid, but only where compensation and benefits are paid for a like need. Under no circumstances can compensation for pain and suffering

be reduced. In the case of widows, where the compensation claim is made under the provisions of the Fatal Accidents Act 1976, or would have been had an action been brought, any payments are exempt.

Benefit Payment Methods

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the unit cost to the Benefits Agency of making benefit payments by *(a)* voucher, *(b)* Girocheque, *(c)* payable order and *(d)* automated credit transfer. [103144]

Mr. Rooker: The overall average unit costs to the Benefits Agency are in the order of 54p for order book vouchers or foils, £1.36 for girocheques, 55p for payable orders and 1p for automated credit transfer.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of *(a)* the cost of benefit fraud in the last financial year and *(b)* the surplus on unclaimed benefits in the last financial year. [103191]

Mr. Rooker: Previous estimates have shown that £2 billion a year has definitely been lost through fraud. A further £3 billion may have been lost in cases where fraud is strongly suspected and a further £2 billion where there is some suspicion of fraud.

We are now measuring the level of fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, the two most vulnerable benefits, by thoroughly investigating a monthly random sample of cases in each Benefit Agency area. Staff error is measured separately by a special team within the Benefits Agency. The latest period for which figures are available is the 12 months ending September 1998 where the level of fraud and error in these benefits was £1.4 billion or 9 per cent. of the total benefit paid.

The latest figures available show the amount left unclaimed in Income Related benefits was between £1,580 million and £4,110 million in 1997–98.

SERPS

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on inherited rights to SERPS for widows and widowers after 6 April 2000. [103323]

Mr. Rooker: We will make a statement as soon as we reach a conclusion on the way forward.

Household Incomes

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to her answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 56W, on what is based his estimate of the total amount of extra social security expenditure necessary to achieve average increases in household income of *(a)* £46 per week before housing costs and *(b)* £52 per week after housing costs. [102814]

Angela Eagle: My written answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 56W, provided estimates for the additional incomes required to ensure that all children were in households with at least half average income. Any implications for increased Social Security expenditure would be dependent upon how the increase in incomes was achieved. Increases in Social Security expenditure can be used to increase household incomes through improving incentives to work and helping people find work as well as through directly increasing benefit payments. Action on a wide range of fronts can boost incomes through increasing the earnings potential of those on low incomes and helping people to achieve their potential. Different approaches would require different levels of Social Security expenditure.

Our strategy for eradicating child poverty within 20 years involves tackling the main causes of poverty and social exclusion. This means helping parents find work, making work pay and ensuring that every child gets the best possible start in life as well as providing additional help for families through the tax and benefit system.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many pensioner households qualify for the 1999 winter fuel payment; and how many of those households had received this payment by 6 December; [102636]

(2) what plans are in place to ensure that households qualifying for the 1999 winter fuel payment receive it on, or before, 15 December. [102637]

Angela Eagle: To ensure that pensioners received their winter fuel payment before Christmas, those eligible were identified during the week commencing 20 September. Over 7.5 million pensioner households qualified for winter fuel payments this winter. By 6 December all those households should have been issued with a winter fuel payment. However, in case some pensioners may not have received their payment, a national and regional press advertising campaign was run from 9 to 15 December inclusive. This advised pensioners that they could ring the National Winter Fuel Payment Helpline with any concerns that they had about their payment.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reasons the cut-off date for eligibility to receive the winter fuel allowance has been set at 12 September 1999. [102682]

Angela Eagle: In order to make Winter Fuel Payments automatically, without incurring disproportionate administration costs, it is necessary to identify those in receipt of qualifying benefits through official departmental computer records. Therefore, entitlement is based on being in receipt of one of the qualifying Social Security benefits for at least a day during a specified qualifying week.

The process of identification and determination of the amount payable takes around 10 weeks, therefore to ensure receipt of the payments before Christmas the qualifying week chosen for this winter was the week beginning 20 September. If the qualifying period was extended or a later week used, the exercise would not have been completed in time for payments to be made before Christmas.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have received the £100 cold weather payment in each constituency in the last year. [102595]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is expected to be available in the new year.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on winter fuel payments following the judgment made by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Taylor. [103839]

Mr. Darling: In 1997, we decided to make Winter Fuel Payments payable to elderly people in receipt of qualifying benefits—principally Retirement Pension. We did this because this meant that payments could be made quickly, automatically and at the right time.

Following the Court's judgment in the Taylor case, help through Winter Fuel Payments will be extended to everyone aged 60 and over, regardless of whether they are claiming a pension or are on another qualifying benefit.

By equalising the age of entitlement for Winter Fuel Payments at 60 for men and women, the number of people who will benefit will increase by up to 1.5 million. This will have an estimated annual programme cost of £85 million. It will mean that next winter, up to 11.5 million people in up to 8.5 million households will benefit from these payments.

In line with the judgment, the Government will also make backdated payments to the start of the scheme for up to 1.9 million people. This will have an estimated one-off programme cost of £125 million.

The age of entitlement for Winter Fuel Payments will initially be set at 60. Thereafter, however, it will move in step with entitlement for State Retirement Pension. It will therefore start to rise in 2010 and reach 65 in 2020.

We will need to find out the names and addresses of the people who are newly eligible for these payments. As the information we hold may not be up to date, we will therefore need to introduce a claims process for Winter Fuel Payments. This process will need to be developed carefully and appropriate IT systems built to deal with claims.

There is no need for people newly eligible for Winter Fuel Payments to contact the Benefits Agency now. A further announcement will be made early next year to advise people how to claim.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average time taken to process a disability living allowance appeal in the Wrexham County Borough Area. [102638]

Angela Eagle: Information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

Between 1 January 1999 and 31 May 1999 the average time taken to process a Disability Living Allowance appeal, in the area handled by the Cardiff office of the Independent Tribunal Service, was 37.8 weeks from date of lodgement to date of tribunal. From the date the appeal was received by the Independent Tribunal Service to the date of tribunal the average time was 33.5 weeks.

The changed structure to the decision making and appeals processes introduced by the Social Security Act 1998 were introduced for Disability Living Allowance on 18 October 1999.

Source:

100 per cent. download from the Appeals Service computer system.

Communication Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what steps his Department is taking to ensure that the need to arrange communication support at personal adviser interviews does not delay the processing of benefit claims; [102244]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to ensure that the requirement to provide properly qualified communication support for deaf claimants does not delay start-up or personal adviser interviews. [102245]

Angela Eagle: Personal advisers in the ONE service provide help and advice on work and benefits to individuals according to their own particular circumstances. We recognise that everyone is different and needs vary from one client to another. ONE pilot offices have trained staff and special facilities to aid people with special communication needs. For example, textphone facilities are available for people with severe hearing impairment and advisers are trained in their use. The services of a qualified interpreter or lipspeaker are available to clients attending a meeting with their personal adviser. All clients, including those with communication difficulties, will be offered a prompt initial meeting in order that claims can be dealt with quickly.

Benefits Appeal Tribunal

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is his policy that, when a person wins a benefits tribunal appeal against loss or suspension of Disability Living Allowance, that benefit should be reinstated forthwith providing that an appeal has not been lodged by his Department against the decision within the permitted timescale. [102035]

Angela Eagle: Where an appeal to the Social Security Commissioner against a Tribunal's decision is not being considered, the decision is implemented and any outstanding payments of benefit are made as quickly as possible.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what powers his Department has to override the decision of a benefit appeals tribunal. [102034]

Angela Eagle: Appeal tribunals are independent and the Department has no powers to override their decisions.

Under the new arrangements for hearing appeals that have just been introduced, appeal tribunals can correct procedural errors or errors on a point of law. Any party to an appeal can request that a decision be referred back to a tribunal, if they consider that an error has been made.

In addition, there is a right of appeal against a tribunal's decision on a point of law to the Social Security and Child Support Commissioners and thereafter to the higher courts.

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers have received *(a)* invalid care allowance and *(b)* underlying entitlement to ICA for a full year in each year from 1978 to 1999. [103073]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers have received invalid care allowance in each year since 1978. [103075]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of carers in receipt of invalid care allowance for each year since 1978

Year [1]	*Number of live cases*
Invalid care allowance live load [1]	
1978	6,137
1979	6,349
1980	6,648
1981	7,098
1982	8,005
1983	8,847
1984	9,494
1985	10,284
1986	30,587
1987	91,392
1988	109,334
1989	120,816
1990	133,912
1991	159,324
1992	188,717
1993	230,313
1994	273,901
1995	316,353
1996	357,471
1997	374,321
1998	373,267
1999[2]	374,815

[1] Figures relate to 31 December
[2] Figures relate to 30 September
Source:
Analytical Services Division: 100 per cent. data

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers have received Invalid Care Allowance for *(a)* two, *(b)* five, *(c)* 10, *(d)* 15 and *(e)* 20 years since 1978. [103074]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Duration of Invalid Care Allowance awards which have terminated

Year	*Up to 2 years*	*Over 2 years to 5 years*	*Over 5 years*	*All durations*
1981[1]	778	528	204	1,510
1982	1,670	777	311	2,758
1983	1,761	748	312	2,821
1984	1,951	844	428	3,223
1985	2,040	1,019	390	3,449
1986	3,337	1,029	412	4,778
1987	18,839	4,890	497	24,226
1988	15,150	9,236	531	24,917
1989	14,390	10,283	705	25,378
1990	14,378	9,454	3,212	27,044
1991	19,040	9,508	4,796	33,344
1992	23,363	9,780	6,009	39,152
1993	26,331	10,361	6,173	42,865
1994	28,516	11,736	6,889	47,141
1995	35,899	16,609	9,040	61,548
1996[2]	21,284	10,464	5,502	37,250
1997	43,446	24,301	12,789	80,536
1998	40,179	25,334	13,643	79,156
1999[3]	29,096	17,047	11,128	57,271

[1] Period is 1 April 1981 to 31 December 1981.
[2] Period is 1 January 1996 to 31 March 1996 and 1 October 1996 to 31 December 1996.
[3] Period is 1 January 1999 to 30 September 1999.
Note:
Information not available prior to 1981.
Source:
Analytical Services Division: 100 per cent. data.

Duration of current Invalid Care Allowance awards

Duration	*Number*
Up to 1 year	64,486
Over 1 year to 2 years	61,302
Over 2 years to 5 years	127,403
Over 5 years to 10 years	88,234
Over 10 years	32,594
All durations	374,019

Note:
Figures relate to 21 July 1999.
Source:
Analytical Services Division: 100 per cent. data.

Benefits (Automated Credit Transfer)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 43W, on automated credit transfer of benefits, in what circumstances he would envisage exception to the norm of benefit payment by automated credit transfer. [103199]

Mr. Rooker: We are still considering this issue. However, one area where an exception is necessary may be where people are prevented from having a bank account, such as those who have been declared bankrupt.

Carers' Pensions

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers for elderly and disabled people, who have been in receipt of or who have underlying entitlement to invalid care allowance and home responsibilities protection, he estimates will benefit from the state second pension in each of the 10 years from the start of the state second pension. [103071]

Mr. Bayley: It is estimated that in the region of 400,000 carers for elderly or disabled people, who have been in receipt of, or have underlying entitlement to, Invalid Care Allowance or home responsibilities protection will build up entitlement to the State Second Pension from the year of its introduction.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the costs of providing the state second pension to carers who have been in receipt of or who have underlying entitlement to invalid care allowance or home responsibilities protection in the first 10 years of the state second pension. [103072]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table:

The estimated costs of providing state second pension to carers who have been in receipt of, or who have underlying entitlement to, invalid care allowance or home responsibilities protection in the first 10 years of the scheme

Year	*£ million*
2002–03	0
2003–04	1
2004–05	2
2005–06	4
2006–07	8
2007–08	12
2008–09	16
2009–10	22
2010–11	26
2011–12	30

Notes:

1. Gross costs are shown in £ million (rounded to nearest million) in 1999–2000 price terms but are unlikely to be accurate to this degree.
2. State Second Pension is assumed to start in 2002.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much it would cost to backdate the state second pension to 1978 for qualifying carers who reach retirement age after 2002–03. [103118]

Mr. Rooker: Records are not available to identify all individuals with a period of actual or underlying entitlement to Invalid Care Allowance or Home Responsibilities Protection back to 1978.

Home Responsibilities Protection

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers have received Home Responsibilities Protection since 1978. [103076]

Mr. Bayley: No reliable information is available on the numbers of non-child carers without Invalid Care Allowance who were either entitled to or claimed Home Responsibilities Protection over the years back to 1978.

Industrial Injuries

Mr. Roy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many people received industrial injuries disablement benefit in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; and what was the total cost of industrial injuries disablement benefit in each of those years; [102305]

(2) how many claims for industrial injuries disablement benefit were paid in respect of stress-related disablement in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 to date. [102306]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Expenditure on industrial injuries disablement benefit

£ million

IIDB	*Expenditure*
1996–97	685
1997–98	690
1998–99	706

Note:
Expenditure for 1997 and 1998 has been taken from the Departmental Report (ISBN 0–10–142312–8). Expenditure for 1999 has been taken from the Pre Budget Report.
Source:
DSS (Analytical Services Division).

Stress related disorders are not a prescribed disease for the purposes of Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit. Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit can be paid in relation to mental disorders only where an industrial accident has been identified as the cause of the disablement.

Industrial injuries disablement figures—accident assessments, current at April 1997 and April 1998, by mental and behavioural disorder

IIDB	*All accidents*	*Mental and behavioural disorders*
At 5 April 1997	212,000	700
At 4 April 1998	217,000	700

Notes:
1. These figures are based on a 10 per cent. sample of Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and include an adjustment for late statistical returns. Figures for 1998 are provisional.
2. Figures have been rounded.
3. Mental disorder is recorded in relation to the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems.
4. Figures for 1999 are not yet available.
Source:
DSS (Analytical Services Division)

Child Support

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his latest estimate of the total amount of child support maintenance owed, broken down between debts of people who have not yet paid anything and those who have made some payments. [100911]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. David Willetts, dated 20 December 1999:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

Unfortunately, CSA does not have the information to answer the question in the way you require. We do not separate debt according to the compliance status of the debtor. However, I can give the information we do hold which may assist you.

The Committee of Public Accounts Session 1995/96 were concerned that the Agency had been unable to estimate the value of uncollectable debt, and advised that the Agency should " ... examine the scope for eliminating a significant amount of this debt since it is unlikely ever to be collected ... ". To address this problem on 31 March 1996 a debt evaluation exercise was undertaken; this exercise is now repeated on an annual basis.

The exercise itself, undertaken by Agency staff, identifies that part of the debt that is probably uncollectable, the results are validated by Analytical Services Division and removed to show a

more realistic debt position. This change was introduced in 1997/98 and was included in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts for that year.

I hope this is helpful.

State Earnings-related Pension Scheme

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will establish the consultation group on inherited rights to SERPS for widows and widowers after 6 April 2000; and if this group will be established before regulations made under the Welfare Reform and Pension Act 1999 are published. [103322]

Mr. Rooker: We will be making further announcements on inherited SERPS shortly.

Child Benefit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of doubling the rate of child benefit *(a)* for each child aged under five years and *(b)* for the youngest child aged under five years, assuming (i) corresponding increases in child rates of means-tested benefits and (ii) no corresponding changes in means-tested benefit rates. [103147]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is in the table.

Estimated annual cost (£ billion)

Age of child	*Corresponding increase in means-tested benefits*	*No corresponding change in means-tested benefits*
All children under 5	2.1	1.6
All subsequent children under 5	1.0	0.7

Notes:

1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest £100 million and are in 2000–01 prices.
2. Assumes an April 2000 start date.
3. Estimates of the child benefit cost have been based on figures taken on the August 1999 5 per cent scan of the child benefit computer system.
4. Estimates of the Income Support (IS) and Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) offset have been calculated from the August 1999 5 per cent. scans of the IS and JSA computer systems.
5. Estimates of the Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) offsets have been calculated from the May 1998 1 per cent. sample of all live HB and CTB claims.
6. The costs have been calibrated to the forecasts of the 2000–01 benefit caseload forecasts, which underpin the 1999 pre-budget report.
7. For lone parents still in receipt of the lone parent rate of child benefit the answer assumes that their new rate will be set equal to the couple's rate of benefit after doubling.
8. The answer assumes that the increases no longer apply once a child reaches the age of 5.
9. The answer assumes for *(b)* that the reference to youngest child means all subsequent children under 5.

Means-tested Benefits

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to propose a statutory obligation to uprate means-tested benefits in line with inflation. [103192]

Angela Eagle: We have no plans to change the existing legislative arrangements.

Lone Parents

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the *(a)* cost in the next five years and *(b)* eventual cost of re-introducing a lone parent premium within the means-tested benefits system for those lone parents with a child aged under five years, to apply immediately to all existing recipients. [103141]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

The estimated cost based on April 2000 rates up until 2001–02 and the estimated long run cost

£ million

Year	*Cost per annum*
2000–01	10
2001–02	20
Long-run	50

Notes:

1. Costs have been rounded to the nearest £10 million.
2. Assumes a long parent premium in year 1—April 2000—of £1.65 (this is the difference between the April 2000 rate of Family Premium for Lone Parents (£15.90) and the standard rate of family premium (£14.25).
3. Lone parent premium is assumed to be subsequently uprated by the ROSSI index.
4. The long-run cost has been expressed in current prices. Because we do not have forecasts of the long-run IS lone parent caseload we have based it on the IS lone parent caseload as in 2000–01.
5. Assumes that the lone parent premium will only be paid to lone parents who have a child aged under five years old.
6. Caseloads are consistent with forecasts underlying the 1999 pre-budget report.
7. Estimates of the Income Support (IS) and Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) costs have been calculated from the August 1999 5 per cent. scans of the IS and JSA computer systems.
8. Estimates of the Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) costs have been calculated from the May 1998 1 per cent. sample of all live HB and CTB claims.
9. Forecasts of the IS lone parent caseload are not available beyond 2001–02.

Low-income Households

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for each of the years 1982 to 1998, what was the number of people in households where one or more adults were in paid work where the income is below half mean income; what was the estimated number of children in these households; and what were the numbers living in families headed by *(a)* a lone parent and *(b)* a couple. [102843]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

The latest information relates to the financial year 1997–98.

Numbers of people in families where one or more adults were in paid work and where the income is below half contemporary mean income before housing costs

millions

Year	Total people	Total children	Total people in lone parent families	Children in lone parent families	Total people in couple families	Children in couple families
FES						
1981	1.7	0.8	0.1	0.0	1.4	0.7
1987	2.4	0.9	0.1	0.0	1.7	0.9
1988–89	2.9	1.2	0.2	0.1	2.1	1.1
1990–91	3.5	1.4	0.3	0.2	2.4	1.2
1991–92	3.5	1.3	0.3	0.2	2.3	1.2
1992–93	3.5	1.4	0.2	0.2	2.4	1.2
1993–94	3.3	1.3	0.2	0.2	2.3	1.2
1994–95	3.3	1.4	0.3	0.2	2.3	1.2
1995–96	3.5	1.4	0.3	0.2	2.4	1.2
FRS						
1994–95	3.3	1.3	0.2	0.1	2.2	1.2
1995–96	3.0	1.1	0.2	0.1	2.0	1.0
1996–97	3.6	1.5	0.3	0.2	2.5	1.3
1997–98	4.0	1.6	0.3	0.2	2.6	1.4

Numbers of people in families where one or more adults were in paid work and where the income is below half contemporary mean income after housing costs

millions

Year	Total people	Total children	Total people in lone parent families	Children in lone parent families	Total people in couple families	Children in couple families
FES						
1981	2.3	1.1	0.1	0.1	2.0	1.0
1987	3.2	1.3	0.1	0.1	2.4	1.2
1988–89	3.5	1.4	0.2	0.1	2.5	1.3
1990–91	4.6	1.8	0.4	0.2	3.2	1.6
1991–92	4.6	1.7	0.4	0.2	3.0	1.5
1992–93	4.6	1.7	0.4	0.2	3.0	1.5
1993–94	4.4	1.7	0.4	0.2	2.9	1.5
1994–95	4.4	1.8	0.5	0.3	2.9	1.5
1995–96	4.7	1.9	0.6	0.4	3.0	1.5
FRS						
1994–95	4.2	1.6	0.3	0.2	2.8	1.5
1995–96	4.2	1.6	0.3	0.2	2.7	1.4
1996–97	4.8	1.9	0.4	0.3	3.1	1.6
1997–98	5.1	2.0	0.5	0.3	3.3	1.7

Notes:

1. The information comes from the "Households Below Average Income" (HBAI) series. The estimates are presented on household income both Before Housing Costs and After Housing Costs in line with HBAI conventions. All the estimates in the table relate to families with an adult in paid work rather than households with an adult in paid work.
2. People living in families which include a self-employed adult have been included in the tables. Self-employment income data is known often to be a poor guide to households' living standards. In 1997–98, around 600,000 to 700,000 of the children in households below half average income had a full-time self-employed person in the household.
3. The column headed "Total people in couple families" does not include couples without children.
4. The estimates based on the Family Expenditure Survey (FES) are for the United Kingdom. For 1988–89 and subsequent years, two years' data have been combined to improve the robustness of the results. For 1994–95 onwards, estimates are available from the larger Family Resources Survey (FRS) and relate to single financial years. The FRS results are for Great Britain.

Income Statistics

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the average income of *(a)* people in work in the United Kingdom and *(b)* people who have retired. [102618]

Mr. Rooker: Comparisons between the average incomes of households can be misleading if not fully explained. The most appropriate income measure when comparing different types of households is weekly net (disposable) equivalised household income (that is to say income that is adjusted to reflect the size and composition of the household). It is standard HBAI practice to give results for income both before and after housing costs, in order to allow for the effect of variations in housing costs between households. Using this definition the following information is available:

For families where someone is working the average net equivalised household income of individuals in benefit units with a working adult in 1997–98 (in April 1999 prices) was £367 per week Before Housing Costs (BHC), and £322 per week After Housing Costs (AHC).

For families with retired people the average net equivalised household income in 1997–98 (in April 1999 prices) was £242 per week BHC and £220 per week AHC.

Using an alternative definition, the average net unequivalised income of pensioner benefit units in 1996–97 was estimated at £175 per week BHC and £154 per week AHC (in July 1996 prices). These figures should not be directly compared to the equivalised income estimates given above.

Notes:

1. All equivalised figures are estimates and are taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data set which is based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS does not include Northern Ireland. 1997–98 is the latest year for which information is available. All estimates are subject to sampling error.

2. The retired are defined as those in benefit units where the head or spouse is aged 60 or over and no adult is in work.

3. All unequivalised figures are taken from The Pensioners' Incomes Series 1996–97 publication (PI), based on the Family Expenditure Survey (FES). Pensioner benefit units are defined here as single people over state pension age (65 for men; 60 for women) and couples (married or cohabiting) where the man is over state pension age.

4. The PI figures for pensioners cannot be directly compared to other groups of the population since they are not equivalised (i.e. they do not take account of differences in size and composition of each household).

5. The PI figures for pensioners cannot be compared directly to HBAI figures for pensioners for several reasons. In addition to the fact that HBAI figures are equivalised, the PI figures relate to a different period (1996–97 compared with 1997–98) and a different geographical area (UK compared with GB). The PI figures are expressed in July 1996 prices and the HBAI figures in April 1999 prices. The PI figures relate to income at the benefit unit level, averaged over all benefit units, while HBAI figures relate to household income, averaged over all individuals.

6. The average net unequivalised income of single pensioners in 1996–97 was estimated at £129 per week BHC and £108 per week AHC (in July 1996 prices). The corresponding estimates for pensioner couples were £248 BHC and £229 AHC.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the level of *(a)* public and *(b)* private funding of London Underground from 1997–98 to 2001–02 using figures at 1997–98 prices. [100949]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Figures are provided for the years 1997–98 to 2000–01. Figures for this year and next are plans/estimates. Levels of Government support for the Underground in 2001–02 have not yet been determined.

(a) The Government provide grant to London Transport for Underground and bus services, and not separately to London Underground Ltd.

Government funding for London Transport is as follows:

Grant to London Transport

£ million

	Cash	*1997–98 prices*
1997–98	629	629
1998–99	411	401
1999–2000	740	705
2000–01	349	324

Note:
These figures reflect the position up to the end of October 1999, including the allocation of the 15 July additional resource package. They will need to be adjusted to take account of more recent decisions including the £50 million for bus initiatives announced on 15 November.

This funding, together with LT's own revenues and investment through Private Finance Initiative (PFI) deals (see following table), supports the following levels of investment in the Underground.

Investment in London Underground

£ million

	Cash	*1997–98 prices*
1997–98	961 (485)	961 (485)
1998–99	751 (468)	733 (457)
1999–2000	803 (531)	765 (506)
2000–01	753 (535)	700 (497)

Note:
Figures in brackets represent Underground investment excluding the Jubilee Line Extension.

(b) LT have made the following estimates of the value of investment provided through the PFI. The figures show what would have been the cost to LT if they had made the investment themselves. The actual cost of the investments to the companies concerned is not available.

Value of PFI investment in London Underground

£ million

	Cash	*1997–98 prices*
1997–98	161	161
1998–99	53	52
1999–2000	179	171
2000–01	150	139

LT resources have been supplemented by the following contributions from third parties:

Developer contributions

£ million

	Cash	*1997–98 prices*
1997–98	31	31
1998–99	22	21.5
1999–2000	—	—
2000–01	65	60.4

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for the central funding of London's Underground over each of the next five years; and if he will list the figure for investment in each year in real terms. [100950]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Government provide grant to London Transport (LT) and not specifically to the Underground. LT have been allocated Government support of £349 million for 2000–01. Some of this funding will be transferred to the Mayor in July next year, when Transport for London assumes responsibility for LT activities other than the Underground.

Levels of government support for the London Underground (LU) in 2001–02 and thereafter have not yet been determined. They will depend on: the extent to which bidders for Public Private Partnership (PPP) contracts improve on the public sector comparator;

decisions on the level of Government funding to be taken following the 2000 spending review; and decisions on funding and fares made by the Mayor for London.

Planned investment in the Underground in 2000–01 totals £753 million (£717 million in 1998–99 prices). This comprises investment of £535 million (£509 million in 1998–99 prices) in the core Underground and a projected £218 million (£207 million in 1998–99 prices) in payments to JLE contractors for investment that took place in previous years.

It is not possible to provide a breakdown of investment figures for 2001–02 and beyond. The PPP is designed to deliver around £8 billion worth of investment. PPP contractors will be required to implement a combination of specific projects and performance enhancements specified in terms of outputs to be delivered. Because the PPP contracts will require the delivery of service outputs, they will not generally specify particular works to be carried out or the amounts of money to be spent on them.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the London Transport report of 1997 into options for London Underground; and if he will make a statement. [103562]

Mr. Hill: The Government took account of LT's analysis in deciding on the Public Private Partnership route for London Underground. We published, and placed in the Library, a description of the facts and analysis underpinning our decision at the time.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the Government and other reports compiled since May 1997 covering PPP, public interest companies, privatisation and other options for London Underground; if he will place them in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [103563]

Mr. Hill: Price Waterhouse submitted a report on a variety of options for London Underground to us in 1997. London Transport also shared with us the analysis they had undertaken at that time. In order to avoid releasing material that would compromise our commercial negotiating position we published, and placed in the Library, a summary of the facts and analysis which underpinned our decision to proceed with the Public Private Partnership for London Underground in March 1998. PricewaterhouseCoopers produced a paper specifically comparing the PPP to a public sector bond-financed approach for us which was published, and placed in the Library, earlier this month.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 431W, when he will report on London Transport's expenditure on external consultants up to the end of the first half of the current financial year. [103582]

Mr. Hill: I shall shortly be providing an up-dated figure for London Transport's expenditure on external advice for the London Underground public private partnership.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what account the Government took, in developing its proposed public-private partnership scheme for London Underground, of the bond-financed investment scheme set out in the report, "The Way Out—An Alternative Approach to the Future of the Underground". [103018]

Mr. Hill: The Government considered fully a variety of options for financing the investment needed in London Underground, including issuing bonds as advocated in this report. We continue to believe that the Public Private Partnership approach will achieve best value for taxpayers.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100160]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Information about the Department's research programmes is made widely available and includes overview material on the DETR website and details of individual programmes and projects—again on the website and through hard copy reports and Newsletters. Details of each contract are not held centrally, but since May 1997 it is estimated that contracts for around 1,500 projects have been let with a total value of around £110 million. Further details are available through the DETR website and through the Government's "Forward Look SET Statistics"—most recently published by the Office of Science and Technology in August 1999.

In answer to the other points:

(a) Standard conditions of contract do not normally permit research contractors to divulge details of contracts or research results without specific approval by the Department, but the Department's policy is to make all results publicly available as soon as is reasonably possible (except in cases such as those including security or commercially confidential information);

(b) Publication dates are agreed between the Department and the research contractor;

(c) None. Where final reports incorporate departmental amendments, these are confined to matters of policy and presentation.

Drink Driving

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of media campaigns in reducing the incidence of drink driving. [101918]

Mr. Hill: Drink drive media campaigns aim to stimulate media and public awareness of the message not to drink and drive. They also provide a focus for

co-ordinated complementary activity by police forces, local authorities and many others in the public and private sectors. Effectiveness is measured on an ongoing basis by:

market research which tracks, each month, advertising recall and changes in attitudes across a range of road safety issues

behaviour change indicators such as proportions failing breath tests and, over the longer term

casualty statistics.

The following tables show the reduction in casualties and in the percentage of positive breath tests over recent years.

Fatalities and serious injuries in drink drive accidents 1979–98

Year	*Fatalities*	*Serious injuries*
1979	1,640	8,300
1980	1,450	7,970
1981	1,420	7,370
1982	1,550	8,010
1983	1,110	6,800
1984	1,170	6,820
1985	1,040	6,810
1986	990	6,440
1987	900	5,900
1988	790	5,100
1989	810	4,790
1990	760	4,090
1991	660	3,610
1992	660	3,280
1993	540	2,660
1994	540	2,840
1995	540	3,000
1996	580	3,010
1997	550	2,940
1998[1]	460	2,520

[1] Provisional

Percentage of breath tests which were positive/refused 1988–98

Year	*Percentage positive/refused*
1988	25
1989	20
1990	17
1991	16
1992	17
1993	15
1994	14
1995	13
1996	13
1997	13
1998	12

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102049]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We are acting to encourage the employment of people with disabilities. In this Department the total number of staff with disabilities is 3 per cent.

As authorised users of the Positive about Disabled People (two ticks) symbol, an Employment Service scheme, the Department guarantees interviews to all people with disabilities meeting the minimum criteria for the job. DETR recruitment policy highlights the importance of fair and open competition, all adverts placed advertise that the Department is an equal opportunities employer. Guidance is provided to line managers on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to highlight best practice with regard to the employment of staff with disabilities.

GM Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 541W, on GM crops, what research on the impact of GM pollen on wild or feral bee populations his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* received. [102833]

Mr. Meacher: The Department has not specifically commissioned any research on the impact of GM pollen on wild or feral bee populations. However, one member of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) has specific expertise in bees and their behaviour. In addition all information on this topic, which is in the public domain, is available to Department scientists and members of ACRE when considering the impact of GM pollen on wild or feral bee populations in relation to a particular release application.

Care and Repair

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements are being made to support care and repair initiatives by local authorities not currently in receipt of support. [102823]

Mr. Mullin: The Department currently provides £6.7 million annually to support 184 home improvement agencies under a three year matched funding scheme which began in April 1999. Seven agencies have been established outside the scheme, in partnership with local authorities and other funders, and a further seven are in the process of being established on that basis. The national co-ordinating body, Care and Repair England Ltd, works to expand the home improvement agency movement and to assist the assembly of funding arrangements.

Otterburn Ranges

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received from hon. Members opposed to Ministry of Defence proposals for changes to the Otterburn ranges in Northumberland National Park. [102875]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* Thirteen Members have recently written to the Secretary of State, enclosing letters from constituents opposed to the development and seeking an update on the current position.

Ordnance Survey

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the reasons for the resignation of the Director General of Ordnance Survey; what advice he has given

Ministers as to working relationships between Ordnance Survey and local government; and if he will make a statement. [103135]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Dr. Robinson's decision to resign as Director General of Ordnance Survey was sudden and unexpected. His stated reason for resignation was difficulty in reaching agreement with local government over a number of important national initiatives. Dr. Robinson decided it was time for someone else to lead these issues to a successful conclusion.

The acting Director General has advised me that there are many positive aspects to the relationship between Ordnance Survey and local government. All local authorities have access to, and gain great benefit from, a wide range of Ordnance Survey data through a centralised agreement. Working in closer partnership to realise benefits made possible by recent technological developments does present a significant new challenge for Ordnance Survey and local government. Ordnance Survey remains committed to meeting this challenge and finding practical, co-ordinated ways forward. For example, the Director General of Ordnance Survey has jointly commissioned with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) an independent review of the relationship between Ordnance Survey and local authorities. This review specifies opportunities for developing the relationship, which are now being jointly pursued by Ordnance Survey and IDeA.

For my part, I fully endorse the vision for the future of Ordnance Survey that was articulated by Geoff Robinson. It has also been greeted with considerable enthusiasm by a broad spectrum of members of the geographical information community and is being vigorously pursued by Ordnance Survey staff.

Housing Revenue

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about his plans for housing revenue account subsidy for the year 2000–01. [103633]

Mr. Raynsford: We consulted authorities on our proposals for Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Subsidy for 2000–01 and related issues in November. Having considered the representations made, I have decided broadly to confirm the proposals on which we consulted authorities, subject to one significant change.

I have decided to increase Management Allowances nationally next year by £21 million. This is in addition to the increase of £67 million in Maintenance Allowances announced at the start of consultation.

We are determined to improve the quality of council housing. We are combating years of under-investment in the fabric of the stock. This is the second significant increase in resources for maintenance, following years of standstill. It is the first increase for management in five years. These additional resources will enable councils to tackle urgent repairs and made a real improvement in tenants' quality of life.

We expect councils to continue to increase the efficiency of their housing management, but the additional investment recognises the increasing demands on them to provide quality services and act as a focal point for local work to tackle social exclusion, consistent with the recommendations made by Policy Action Team 5 which looked at housing management.

The increases in maintenance allowances and management allowances are in addition to the extra £3.6 billion for capital investment in local authority housing announced by the Deputy Prime Minister in July 1998, following the Comprehensive Spending Review.

We are also making available additional resources of £15 million next year, with a further £15 million in 2001–02, to help authorities introduce resource accounting into the Housing Revenue Account. In addition, we are allocating an extra £12 million over the next two years to help tenants get involved in managing their homes through tenant participation compacts.

Copies of the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy Determination 2000–01 and related Determinations have been sent to all local housing authorities in England. I am arranging for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

Valuation Tribunal

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response he has received to the consultation paper on valuation tribunal membership issues. [103636]

Ms Armstrong: We have received 66 responses, the majority of which support our proposals. A list of responses that may be made public has been placed in the Library of the House. Copies of individual responses may be obtained through my Department's library.

Regulations will be introduced early in the New Year to give effect to the following measures:

to provide for joint valuation tribunal and local authority appointment of valuation tribunal members, to replace the existing arrangements for appointment by local authorities alone (to apply to appointments from 1 April 2000);

to provide for the appointment of valuation tribunal members by the Secretary of State where no appointment is made within 28 days of a vacancy occurring, replacing existing arrangements that apply three months from a vacancy occurring; and

to provide for the transfer of appeals to other valuation tribunals where it appears there may be a conflict of interest.

Individual valuation tribunals will be consulted further about the timing of planned reductions in their number of members.

Accessible Transport

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to promote the provision of accessible transport for disabled people. [103619]

Mr. Hill: The Government believe that accessible public transport, within the framework of an integrated transport policy, is fundamentally important to delivering our commitment to comprehensive civil rights for disabled people. We have already implemented regulations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to ensure that all new trains are accessible to disabled people, including those who travel in wheelchairs. We

will be introducing similar requirements for new buses and coaches from next year and for licensed taxis from 2002.

We are also working with local authorities to produce guidance on best practice in removing barriers to public transport infrastructure and in the pedestrian environment.

The Disability Rights Task Force has just published its recommendations to Government on possible extensions to the Disability Discrimination Act. We are considering their recommendations for further requirements on accessibility in the transport field.

Rural White Paper

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) which organisations he has consulted in the preparation of the Rural White Paper; [103218]

(2) if he will make a statement on what measures he intends to introduce to maximise consultation on the Rural White Paper. [103219]

Mr. Mullin: A discussion document: "Rural England" was launched in February this year. It invited views on a series of questions on a wide range of rural issues. About 1,800 copies were sent out to organisations with an invitation to comment and a further 8,200 copies were distributed for seminars and issued on request. The document was also available on the DETR internet site. Just under 800 responses were received from a variety of national bodies, local authorities, parish councils, farming, environmental and other organisations, public, private and voluntary bodies, and individuals. A summary of the issues arising from the consultation process, including a list of respondents, is available in the House of Commons Library and on the DETR website.

The Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) have recently published their report on "Rural Economies", which is an important contribution to the debate about rural policies. The report highlights a series of issues for discussion and invites comments by 11 February 2000. Responses received will be considered in the preparation of the Rural White Paper.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 29 September to the Minister for the Environment on behalf of his constituent Mr. Logan. [103086]

Mr. Meacher: I replied to the right hon. Member's letter on 13 December.

Highway Inquiries

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when the current rules and procedures for highway inquiries were published; [103114]

(2) what plans he has to update the existing rules and procedures for highway inquiries following the publication of the "A New Deal for Transport" White Paper. [103115]

Mr. Hill: The current rules that regulate highway inquiries in England and Wales were made by Statutory Instrument in 1994. They came into force on 10 January 1995. There are no plans to update them.

However, the Government's initiative for Modernising Planning referred to in "A New Deal for Transport" includes proposals for improving planning appeal procedures. Following consultation in August 1998 these proposals are being worked up and will be implemented early next year.

Telecommunications Masts

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the rating of telecommunications masts; and if he will make a statement. [103635]

Ms Armstrong: I have today published a consultation paper on the rating of telecommunications masts which are shared by multiple operators. We are encouraging the sharing of masts and mast sites to keep environmental intrusion to a minimum. However, the growth of shared sites has caused uncertainty in their rates assessment. Our proposals would remove that uncertainty by providing that shared sites receive only one rates bill.

The Government would welcome views on the consultation paper by 28 January 2000.

Aircraft (Seat Safety)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Civil Aviation Authority about safety *(a)* in general, *(b)* relating to the spaces between seats on aircraft and *(c)* relating to reclining seats; and if he will make a statement. [103598]

Mr. Mullin: Both the Minister for Transport and I meet representatives of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) from time to time to discuss a wide range of aviation safety issues.

The UK is unique in having an airworthiness requirement for minimum seat space. The CAA, which is responsible for the safety regulation of UK registered passenger aircraft, has set minimum requirements for seating space because it is one of a number of factors which can have an effect on the evacuation of an aircraft in an emergency. The specified minimum space between seats applies for the seat backs in the upright position, as required for take-off and landing. Providing that the minimum standards are adhered to, the seat spacing and the amount of recline available and their effect on passenger comfort is a matter for the operators.

Local Authority Reorganisation

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he will make available to authorities that were reorganised on 1 April 1998 for reorganisation costs incurred by them in 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [103722]

Ms Armstrong: On 8 October I invited authorities which were eligible to participate in the Local Government Reorganisation Cost Scheme for 2000–01 which reorganised on 1 April 1998, to submit estimates

of the amount of expenditure they expect to incur on transition costs of reorganisation in 2000–01. On the basis, inter alia, of the information provided by the authorities, I have decided the maximum amounts that it would be appropriate to allocate towards such costs.

The amounts are as follows:

£000

Authority	Maximum amounts 2000–01
West Berkshire Council	543
Reading Borough Council	1,978
Slough Borough Council	701
Wokingham District Council	3,287
County of Herefordshire District Council	1,540
Worcestershire County Council	2,978
Plymouth City Council	2,376
Torbay Borough Council	2,215
Thurrock Borough Council	3,318
Nottingham City Council	1,900
Halton Borough Council	3,770
Telford and Wrekin District Council	726
Medway Borough Council	1,650
Peterborough City Council	475
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council	804
Blackpool Borough Council	760
Total	29,021

Leasehold Reform

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the outcome of the consultation on residential leasehold reform; and how he proposes to take the matters forward. [103750]

Mr. Raynsford: We have published today a report on the responses to the consultation paper "Residential Leasehold Reform in England and Wales" which was issued in November 1998. 956 responses were received. There was widespread support for the objectives put forward in the consultation paper although there were differences as to the way in which these should be achieved.

As Her Majesty announced in the gracious speech on 17 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 7, the Government will publish a draft Bill in the current session on proposals for commonhold and leasehold reform. This will provide a further opportunity for consultation on detailed proposals. We have also published today a summary of the proposals that are likely to be included in the draft Bill. Copies of the report and the summary have been placed in the House Libraries.

These proposals, if approved by Parliament, would represent a major improvement to the rights of existing leaseholders. With the proposals for Commonhold, which are being taken forward by my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor, they will go a long way towards ensuring that all home owners enjoy the same degree of security and control over their homes.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102740]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office set out in her reply given on 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 264W, corporate action that we are taking to encourage the employment of people from ethnic minority backgrounds. A total of 5.2 per cent. of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions current workforce (including its Agencies) are from an ethnic minority.

My Department is taking a number of measures to increase the representation of people from an ethnic minority background. We have participated in the Windsor Fellowship, Diversity UK, Afro-Caribbean and National Mentoring Careers Fairs aimed at encouraging ethnic minority undergraduates to consider a career in the Department. We have taken on ethnic minority students on Windsor Fellowship summer placements for a number of years and plan to increase the number of placements from two to six next year. We also want to bring in senior and professional people from the ethnic minorities on secondment. In addition to this, we advertise in Job Centres and newspapers with a large ethnic minority readership, for example *The Voice* and *The Eastern Eye*, to attract potential ethnic minority recruits.

Transport Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the outcome of the Transport Council held in Brussels on 9–10 December; and if he will make a statement. [102635]

Mr. Hill: The Transport Council met in Brussels on 9–10 December. My right hon. and noble Friend Lord Macdonald of Tradeston represented the United Kingdom.

The Council reached political agreement on a package of three draft directives, which take the opening of the internal market for rail services a significant step further. The package will amend Directives 91/440 and 95/18 and replace Directive 95/19. It will: provide open access for rail freight operators to a Trans-European Rail Freight Network (TERFN), which includes all major terminals and ports; broaden the scope of existing provisions for separation of accounts and certain essential functions between infrastructure management and train service operations; extend Community-wide recognition of train operators' licences to all railway undertakings established in the Community; and establish rules for allocating capacity on railway infrastructure and charging for its use. Conclusions were also adopted on improving interoperability and alleviating rail bottlenecks

The Commission gave a progress report to Council on the definition phase of the Galileo satellite navigation project, including a report on discussions with the US and Russia. Lord Macdonald expressed the UK's disappointment at the pace of work on public-private financing and cost benefit analysis. He said that more work was needed to enable decisions to be taken at the end of 2000 on the future development of satellite navigation in Europe.

There was a debate on the establishment of a European Aviation Safety Authority. The Commission proposed that the new authority should be set up as a Community agency. The UK and some other member states argued that an international body was preferable, as the Council had previously agreed. It would be genuinely pan-European and would have the support of the aviation industry. Following the debate, the Presidency asked the Commission to produce an analysis of its proposal for a Community agency, but also to begin exploratory talks with third countries.

The Commission gave a presentation to the Council on air traffic management in Europe. Referring to lack of ATM capacity as a cause of increasing delays, and to the need for greater cooperation between states, the Commission proposed centralised management of a "Single European Sky". The Commissioner, Mrs. de Palacio, proposed that she should chair a high level group of member states' representatives, to study the issue. It would aim to report to the Transport Council in June 2000.

The Council discussed aviation noise problems. The Commission reported on the latest developments in the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) on international standards and on its recent consultations with the United States. The Council reaffirmed its commitment to the ICAO process, and repeated that, if the outcome was successful and met the EU's objectives, existing Community legislation could be replaced by new international rules if these were more favourable. The Commission was invited to look at the issue urgently and propose solutions.

The Commission presented a study on the economic impact of the draft directive on ferry manning, which would ensure that conditions for third country crew members on intra-EC ferry services were at least as favourable as those of EC crew members. The study suggested that the impact would be negligible. The Commission's view remained that the directive would protect jobs in the EU. The UK and some other member states welcomed the report and strongly supported the proposal, which was first put forward during the UK Presidency. The Council will return to the issue at a later date.

The Council held a further debate on proposals for the extension of working time provisions to road transport. There remains disagreement between member states on fundamental issues, including application to the self-employed. Following the debate, the Presidency concluded that the Council should continue to look for solutions.

There was a progress report from the Commission on negotiations with ten Central and Eastern European countries on extension of the aviation single market.

The Council adopted Resolutions on the promotion of short sea shipping and on ways to encourage the greater use of intermodal freight transport. It also adopted a mandate authorising the Commission to commence air transport negotiations with Cyprus.

There were also Commission reports on: indicators on transport and the environment; the recent report of the forum on barriers to innovation in transport, which aimed to produce an action plan by the end of 2000; Community accession to Eurocontrol, on which the Commission hoped that an Accession protocol could be signed at the MATSE VI Conference of aviation Ministers on 27 January; the recent aviation open skies conference in Chicago; and a Commission Communication on air transport and the environment.

Health and Safety Executive

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the projected costs of the Health and Safety Executive for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [102750]

Mr. Meacher: The projected costs of the Health and Safety Executive for financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–2001 are *(a)* £230 million and *(b)* £239 million. The figure for 2000–01 excludes the cost of the public inquiry into the Ladbroke Grove train crash.

NATS

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the property held by the CAA on behalf of the National Air Traffic Services or by NATS itself, indicating in each case *(a)* its location, *(b)* its present value, *(c)* whether it is leased or owned with details of any leases, *(d)* whether the property is wholly or partially occupied by NATS and *(e)* which company or consultancy has given advice on the property value recently. [102913]

Mr. Mullin: The information is not available in the form requested at the present time. I understand that the total number of properties involved is in excess of 140, many of which are radio stations, radar sites and navigational aids. My Department's advisers are currently in the process of carrying out a property due diligence exercise as part of the preparatory work for the proposed public private partnership. However, it is not likely to be completed before spring 2000.

Minerals (West Midlands)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the objection by the Government Office for the West Midlands to the Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Minerals Local Plan 1996 to 2006. [102991]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government Office for the West Midlands is maintaining an objection to policy M16 (Crushed Rock Aggregates) in the Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Minerals Local Plan. The objection is to the effect that the policy on crushed rock extraction should be more flexible to enable proposals to come forward, in exceptional circumstances, for new as well as extended sites. Any application for a new site for crushed rock extraction would be determined in the light of all material planning considerations, including the extensive nature of existing reserves. A proposed modification meeting the Government Office's objection was placed on deposit by the joint minerals planning authority on 3 December.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 213W, concerning the Climate Change Levy,

what role the Energy Technology Support Unit will have in determining cost-effective measures with respect to the Climate Change Levy. [103019]

Mr. Meacher: The Department has appointed ETSU to be its independent, professional and technical advisers in discussions about prospective climate change levy agreements with eligible energy intensive industry sector participants. ETSU work with the Sector Associations and the Department to advise on the potential for energy and carbon dioxide savings in the respective sectors. In addition, they are advising the Department on the stringency of target offers from the Sector Associations, principally by comparing them with projections drawn from ETSU's "All Cost Effective" scenario in their report "Industrial sector carbon dioxide emissions: projections and indicators for the UK 1990–2010" published in April 1999.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Fund (Replacement)

17. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on plans to replace the millennium fund after 2000. [102011]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Millennium Commission will receive £2.017 billion from the National Lottery over its lifetime. Once the Commission has received this sum, its share will be transferred to the New Opportunities Fund.

National Lottery (Small Grants Schemes)

19. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures he plans to ensure that Lottery money awarded under newly launched small grants schemes represents value for money. [102013]

Kate Hoey: Lottery distributing bodies are required, under the Financial Directions with which my right hon. Friend issues them, to adopt stringent monitoring and evaluation arrangements for all funding programmes to ensure money is distributed effectively and efficiently. The amount of help which small groups received from the Lottery doubled in the past year. The proportion of grants of less than £100,000 increased from 9 per cent. to 17 per cent.

Cultural Events (Access)

22. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to improve access to cultural events for school children. [102018]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend and I are committed to providing every child with the opportunity to access cultural events and we are taking a number of measures to ensure this.

Seaside Resorts (Lancashire)

23. **Mrs. Humble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department is taking to encourage the regeneration of Lancashire seaside resorts; and if he will make a statement. [102019]

Janet Anderson: The Government's strategy for tourism "Tomorrow's Tourism" contains a raft of initiatives to promote quality tourism, including a model regeneration plan for resorts. The English Tourism Council have been given primary responsibility for resort issues and they are currently setting up a Resorts Task Force to tackle issues in resorts.

Children's Films

24. **Mr. Cawsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to encourage the British film industry to make more films for children. [102020]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have asked the Chairman of the Film Council to consider the recommendation of the Film Education Working Group that production of films for children should be one of the priorities of the Council's Lottery strategy. The availability of a wider range of films for children could lead to both educational and commercial benefits.

Unified Accommodation Scheme

25. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on progress towards a unified accommodation grading scheme. [102021]

Janet Anderson: The new standardised accommodation ratings in England were launched on 13 September by the English Tourism Council, the AA and the RAC. They are available throughout the whole of the United Kingdom through the AA and the RAC. I recently wrote to my colleagues in the National Assembly for Wales and in the Scottish Parliament suggesting that we look again at our respective accommodation schemes, the differences between them and the scope for arriving at common standards.

Green Spaces

27. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in what ways he expects children to benefit from the green spaces initiative funded by the New Opportunities Fund. [102023]

Kate Hoey: NOF is currently consulting and drawing up its bidding guidance for the green spaces programme. However, it is envisaged that projects involving opportunities for children's play, organised and informal sport, playing fields, access to the countryside and creating safer routes to school will be eligible among others. Such projects will greatly benefit the health, happiness, safety and social well-being of children, particularly in areas of multiple deprivation.

National Lottery Proceeds

28. **Mr. Sawford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to ensure an equitable regional spread of the proceeds from the Lottery. [102024]

Mr. Chris Smith: Following the National Lottery Act 1998 and my revised Policy Directions, distributors must now take into account the need to ensure that all parts of

the country have access to funding and the scope for reducing economic and social deprivation. Working with the Lottery distributors, we have commissioned research to establish what more can be done to help areas where the take-up of Lottery funding has been low.

Football

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has held with the Football Association on the venues under consideration for the staging of major football matches during the reconstruction of Wembley Stadium; and what advice he is giving to the Football Association on appropriate locations. [102000]

Mr. Chris Smith: I will expect the Football Association, on considering alternative venues for major football matches while Wembley is under re-construction, to look to the wide range of excellent football stadiums available around Britain—including, of course, some built with Millennium Commission assistance. It is worth bearing in mind that we hosted EURO 96 in England, in a variety of venues, and demonstrated then that there are a number of excellent football stadiums that could be used.

Lottery Applications

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the successful lottery applications in the Lancaster and Wyre parliamentary constituency since May 1997. [103098]

Kate Hoey: According to the latest information provided by my Department by the distributing bodies 73 awards worth a total of £11,395,044 have been made to recipients based in Lancaster and Wyre.

Museums and Galleries

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what benefits he expects to secure for the public from the new funding agreement with national museums and galleries. [102088]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 22 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 51W.

Sports Funding

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the Government grant support given to UK Sport and its predecessors in each year from 1994 to 1999. [103875]

Kate Hoey: UK Sport was established by Royal Charter on 19 September 1996 and became fully operational on 1 January 1997. Since then the grant in aid made available has been:

	£ million
1996–97	4.0
1997–98	11.8
1998–99	11.6
1999–2000	12.6

Prior to establishing UK Sport, funding for sport was channelled through the GB Sports Council. In the years before UK Sport funding to GB Sports Council was:

	£ million
1993–94	50.6
1994–95	49.4
1995–96	49.2
1996–97	27.7

World Cup 2006

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the accounts of the FA (FIFA) World Cup 2006 bid for *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99. [102307]

Kate Hoey: The bid to host the World Cup in 2006 is a bid by the Football Association, with the full backing of the Government and Sport England, who have allocated £3 million of Lottery funding for the bid. The bid is not by Government and any decision to publish the accounts is for the FA to make. Reference to the bid is made in the FA's 1998 general annual report and accounts.

Olympic Stadium, Manchester

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will investigate the possibility of relocating the proposed new Olympic Stadium in Manchester. [102715]

Kate Hoey: The final decision on timing and location of any UK Olympic bid rests with the British Olympic Association. The BOA feel that the strongest option for a successful bid would be to base it in London. The BOA is therefore conducting a feasibility study of a possible future London-based Olympic bid, which they will submit to Government in the new year.

Peat

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his Department's policy is on the use of peat in and around the Millennium Dome. [103010]

Janet Anderson: A variety of new and exciting gardens and landscape installations are being constructed on and around the Millennium Experience site. Some of these are being constructed by NMEC, and some by English Partnerships as part of the long-term legacy of the site. In the case of soil mixes and topsoil, 'greenwaste' is being used. This is based on recycled cuttings, taken in spring/autumn and mulched, then composted for 4–6 months and does not contain peat. In the case of mulch and hydroseed, this is specified as peat free. Suppliers are able to propose their own product to meet this specification, so a variety of options have been used, but generally products based on chopped paper or something of this nature will be the most common solution. NMEC cannot make an absolute commitment to be "peat free", as soils attached to plants procured from commercial nurseries could contain small quantities of peat.

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet Meetings

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish the dates on which the Cabinet meets and the duration of each meeting. [102643]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 604W.

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the remit of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee. [103047]

The Prime Minister: The Terms of Reference of the Joint Consultative Committee are

"To consider policy issues of joint interest to the Government and the Liberal Democrats."

Under these Terms of Reference, the Committee has agreed that it will also consider issues arising from European Union institutional reform which are being considered by the European Council.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if Liberal Democrat members of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee are under an obligation not to disclose publicly the content of discussions in that forum. [103077]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 484–85W.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister who attended the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee meeting on 13 December on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Party. [103081]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 362W.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister how many Ministers and officials accompanied him on his visit to the United States from 4 to 7 February 1998. [103180]

The Prime Minister: As I have already made public, I was accompanied by nine key officials from No. 10 and three Ministers, together with the usual number of security and secure telecommunications staff that accompany a Prime Minister on an overseas visit.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister how many meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government, other than President Clinton, during his visit of 20 to 23 June 1997, indicating the date and locations of each meeting, and the names of the persons met. [103139]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the statement I gave the House on 24 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns 671–73W.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Public-Private Partnerships

34. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what assessment the Commission has made of the adequacy of the resources available to the National Audit Office to assess the value for money of public-private partnership funded schemes. [101990]

Mr. Sheldon: The Commission last met on 2 December to consider the estimates for the National Audit Office. Clearly, the evaluation of public-private partnership schemes, including projects under the Private Finance Initiative, is a major priority for the National Audit Office. Within the past two years, the NAO has published 10 reports on such projects and a further report setting out its criteria for evaluating public-private partnerships. More work in this area is planned and, while the Commission will continue to monitor the situation, I am satisfied that at present the current level of funding for this work is adequate.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Clergy Pensions

35. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what is the proportion of the annual Church Commissioners' revenue allocated to clergy pensions; and if he will make a statement. [101991]

Mr. Stuart Bell: In 1998 (the latest year for which figures are available), the Commissioners spent £85 million on clergy pension benefits. They also contributed £23 million to help dioceses take on the cost of pension contributions under the new clergy pension scheme established in 1998, as well as paying the contributions for clergy for whom the Commissioners are responsible. The total expenditure on pensions and pension contributions was £110 million, which was 69 per cent. of the Commissioners' overall expenditure.

Use of Church Buildings

36. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what the policy of the Commissioners is on co-operation with people of other faiths in the use of church buildings. [101992]

Mr. Stuart Bell: Guidance on this issue is set out in "Communities and Buildings" by the General Synod Board of Mission. I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the House of Commons Library.

Mobile Telephone Antennae

37. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment they have made of the benefits of allowing the use of church property for mobile telephone antennae. [101993]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Commissioners are approached from time to time with requests to permit the installation of mobile phone antennae on their agricultural land. Requests are dealt with on a case by case basis, taking into account the impact on the surrounding area, and are subject to the planning process.

The Commissioners do not have responsibility for granting requests to erect mobile phone antennae on churches in use which are a matter for Diocesan Advisory Committees and planning authorities.

Anglican Services

38. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment he has made of the numbers of clergymen who will be required to conduct Anglican services in 2020. [101994]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council is responsible for monitoring clergy numbers. No assessment of the likely numbers of full-time stipendiary clergy has been made for 2020 but work is currently being undertaken on long-term projections. Stipendiary clergy men and women are not the only resource for ministry available to the Church. At the end of 1998 there were, in addition to the 9,636 stipendiary clergy men and women, 1,206 non-stipendiary ministers and nearly 10,000 Readers. There are also 1,304 chaplains ministering in hospitals, schools, prisons and to the armed forces.

DEFENCE

Departmental Sites (Water and Sewerage)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the out-sourcing of water supplies and sewage treatment at his Department's sites. [102743]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 557W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins).

Depleted Uranium Ordnance

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research he has commissioned on the impact on health of oxide dust created by the use of depleted uranium weapons. [102747]

Mr. Spellar: The potential hazards caused by depleted uranium are well understood and are widely documented in existing scientific literature. The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's Radiation Protection Service, then the Defence Radiological Protection Service, published in 1993 a summary report of its assessment of the radiological and chemical hazards of depleted uranium. The report explained that there are two types of hazard posed by the use of depleted uranium: a radiation hazard, although depleted uranium is a low specific activity material (as defined by the International Atomic Energy Agency); and a chemical toxicity hazard, which is similar to that posed by other heavy metals, such as lead. A copy of the summary report has been placed in the Library of the House.

In addition, on 19 March, the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces published a detailed paper "Testing for the presence of depleted uranium in UK veterans of the Gulf conflict: The Current Position". This paper describes the scenarios in which UK troops may have been exposed to DU in the Gulf and outlines the possible health effects of such exposures. It also includes reference to the case narrative "Depleted Uranium in the Gulf", published by the US Department of Defense; this case narrative sets out details of the programme of testing being conducted in the United States in the context of veterans possibly exposed to depleted uranium during the Gulf conflict. Copies of the paper have been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent reports he has received on radiation which has been measured in the vicinity of impacts of ammunition containing depleted uranium. [103391]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the incidence of birth deformities in areas where ordnance containing depleted uranium has been used. [102581]

Mr. Spellar: No assessment has been undertaken by my Department of the incidence of birth deformities where ammunition containing uranium has been used. We are not aware of any peer-reviewed epidemiological studies or validated data to suggest a link between ammunition containing depleted uranium and birth deformities. My Department would consider carefully any such studies or data if these became available.

Armed Forces (Benefits)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Social Security about members of the armed forces claiming benefits; and if he will make a statement. [102852]

Mr. Spellar: Service personnel and their families resident in the United Kingdom have the same degree of entitlement to receive benefits as other members of the general population and are subject to the same qualifying criteria. My Department has not held discussions with the Department of Social Security other than to ensure that Service personnel and families are not penalised as a result of their required mobility.

MOD Ministers and officials discuss periodically with other Government Departments, including the Department of Social Security, a range of policy issues affecting the Service community. Most recently these discussions have taken place within the forum of the Service Families Task Force.

The independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body provides robust arrangements for a fair level of remuneration for the Armed Forces and ensures that Services' pay does not fall below the national minimum wage. This year's Armed Forces Pay Review Body award was above inflation, implemented in full, on time and un-staged for the first time since 1995.

Disciplinary Procedures

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the average *(a)* cost and *(b)* length, in each armed service, of (i) a summary hearing and (ii) a court-martial. [102531]

Mr. Spellar: (i) It is not possible to provide information for summary hearings. This level of detail is not recorded.

(ii) There are no detailed figures to indicate the average duration of a court-martial and costs for each trial are not recorded. However, calculations have been performed that show the average daily rate of a court-martial for each Service. They are as follows:

Naval Service

£1,200

Army

£1,600

RAF

£1,700.

Experience shows that a contested trial at court-martial lasts on average about two and a half days.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for each armed service *(a)* how many applications were made for redress of grievance and *(b)* what was the average length of time between application and conclusion of the process, in each of the past five years. [102529]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel in *(a)* the Royal Navy, *(b)* the Army and *(c)* the RAF have elected for court-martial rather than face a summary hearing since 1997. [102525]

Mr. Spellar: There has not been a need to compile statistics across the Services in a way that would enable this information to be provided in detail. However, such figures as are available for the three Services indicate that less than 1 per cent. of those facing summary dealings have elected to be tried by court-martial.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for each of the armed services, how many courts-martial have been convened in each of the past five years; and at what locations. [102528]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for each armed service, what is the average time a suspect spends in custody awaiting court martial. [102534]

Mr. Spellar: The information is as follows:

Army

Since January 1999, 70 soldiers in court martial cases have been held in close arrest for an average period of 80 days while awaiting trial for serious offences.

RN/RAF

No cases are recorded over the past three years of suspects held in custody awaiting court martial.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel in each of the armed services were *(a)* arrested by civilian police, *(b)* released by civilian police into the custody of the Royal Military Police, *(c)* arrested by civilian police and taken before a magistrate and *(d)* released from magistrates' courts into the custody of the Royal Military Police, in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [102530]

Mr. Spellar: There has been no historical requirement to compile statistics across the three services in a way which would enable this detailed information to be provided.

Armed Forces Legal Branches

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people are employed in the *(a)* Army legal service, *(b)* Royal Navy legal service and *(c)* the RAF legal service, broken down by (i) rank and (ii) grade; and at what locations they are based. [102532]

Mr. Spellar: The information is as follows:

Naval Service

The Naval Service does not have a dedicated legal service. There are, however, 33 qualified barristers in the Royal Navy, 17 of whom are serving in legal appointments. Details of barristers, ranks and grades in support are:

Naval Service	*Number*	
(i) Ranks		
Commodore	1	Barristers
Commander	6	Barristers
Lieutenant Commander	7	Barristers
Lieutenant	3	Barristers
Warrant Officer	3	
Chief Petty Officer	4	
Petty Officer	3	
Leading Rate	6	
Able Rate	4	
(ii) Grades		
Administrative Officer	4	
Civilian typist	1	
Overall total staff	42	

Locations

Portsmouth, London, Northwood, Yeovilton, Plymouth, Faslane.

Army	*Number*
(i) Ranks	
Major General	1
Brigadier	2
Colonel	4
Lieutenant Colonel	16
Major	19
Captain	40
Warrant Officer	1 x 2
Warrant Officer	2 x 2
Staff Sergeant	1
Sergeant	1
(ii) Grades	
Executive Officer	1
Administrative Officer	16
Administrative Assistant	5
Typists	17
Personal Secretary	3
Locally employed civilians	12
Overall total	142

Locations

All Divisional Headquarters in the UK and Germany, Permanent Joint Headquarters Northwood, Joint Headquarters Germany, Bielefeld (Germany), RAF Uxbridge (Army Prosecuting Authority), Upavon and London (Directorate of Army Legal Services), Glasgow (Military Secretary), Headquarters British Forces Cyprus, HQ Land, Headquarters Royal Marines Portsmouth, HQ Northern Ireland, SHAPE Belgium, Kosovo, Bosnia and Georgia, and one exchange officer in Australia.

RAF	*Number*
(i) Ranks	
Air Vice Marshal	1
Air Commodore	1
Group Captain	3
Wing Commander	7
Squadron Leader	7
Flight Lieutenant	8
(ii) Grades	
Retired Officer	1
Executive Officer	1
Administrative Officer	2
Personal Secretary	2
Administrative Assistant	1
Typist	1
Locally Employed Civilians	7
Overall total	43

Locations

Innsworth, High Wycombe, Northern Ireland, Cyprus and Germany.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* service personnel and *(b)* civilian dependants have sought and received advice from the legal branches of each armed service; and how many of those received advice (i) by telephone, (ii) by letter, (iii) by clients visiting legal branch offices and (iv) by legal specialists visiting clients (1) at UK locations and (2) overseas locations, specifying the locations in each case. [102526]

Mr. Spellar: To establish which of this information is held by the three services could be undertaken only at disproportionate cost.

Absence without Leave

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in each armed service, how many personnel *(a)* went absent without leave and *(b)* deserted in each of the last three years. [102533]

Mr. Spellar: The services do not hold statistics relating to the number of personnel who went absent without leave in each of the last three years. However, the figures relating to incidents of absences without leave among personnel, which could include more than one instance of absence by an individual, is as follows:

Year	*Royal Navy*	*Royal Marines*	*Army*	*Royal Air Force*
1996	45	10	1,345	36
1997	32	10	1,355	23
1998	28	6	1,722	26

There were no deserters from the Royal Navy or Royal Marines within the last three years. Figures are not held by the Army. RAF records reflect the year in which an individual was convicted at court-martial. These are as follows:

Year	*Royal Air Force*
1996	3
1997	1
1998	2

Ammunition Sales

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what talks have occurred this year between the Ministry of Defence and BAe regarding the future of ammunition sales; and if he will make a statement. [100752]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Discussions have taken place throughout the year between Ministry of Defence officials and British Aerospace and Royal Ordnance managers, to determine the potential for a partnering arrangement with Royal Ordnance for the supply of a range of ammunition products. We are seeking arrangements which will provide better and improving value for money for the taxpayer, represent a viable business for Royal Ordnance, and enhance the future supply of ammunition for the British Armed Forces. We hope to conclude discussions shortly.

HMS Ocean

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what were the reasons for HMS Ocean's recent visits to ports for repair; [100881]

(2) what work was carried out on HMS Ocean during her recent visits to ports for repair; and what was the cost of those repairs. [100882]

Mr. Spellar: Seven routine port visits were programmed in to HMS Ocean's recent lengthy deployment and, as with all port visits, the opportunity was taken to carry out routine maintenance and repairs. No visits were specifically arranged for repairs, but two of the scheduled visits were extended slightly to enable routine maintenance checks and some defect repairs to be undertaken while the vessel was alongside. The work carried out included main engine air charge cooler defect repairs and to change a rotating joint on a radar. This work cost approximately £114,000. These repairs have had no significant impact on the operational programme of the vessel.

Benefits

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service families receive working families tax credit. [102240]

Mr. Spellar: From October 1999 (in the UK), working families tax credit (WFTC) is being paid direct to the claimant (including UK service personnel or their spouses). Although WFTC is administered by Inland Revenue (IR), it was enacted by DSS legislation. Consequently, since claims are made direct to the IR by either service personnel (or their spouses), the MOD has no overview of the total number of claimants. However,

from April 2000, WFTC (in the UK) will be payable to claimants, including service personnel, through their salary if they wish. As the credit may be paid to the spouses of service personnel, however, our information about which service personnel in the UK receive the credit will not be comprehensive. Overseas, MOD is required to make separate arrangements for payment of most DSS benefits, including WFTC, to service (and civilian) personnel as they are at present disqualified by the DSS by virtue of their residence outside the UK. The total number of service claimants overseas will not be known until after April next year when the transfer from FC to WFTC is complete. I regret, therefore, that MOD is unable to provide the information requested.

A400M Programme

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with the Department of Trade and Industry over the A400M programme. [102744]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Along with other Departments, the Department of Trade and Industry has been consulted over the Future Transport Aircraft programme, for which A400M is a contender. Given that a competition is under way, I cannot comment further at this stage.

MOD Housing (Hampshire)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the occupation and unoccupation levels of *(a)* former and *(b)* current MOD-owned housing in Hampshire. [102602]

Mr. Kilfoyle: We do not hold records about former MOD housing. For current MOD-owned housing in Hampshire, including those which have been leased back from Annington Homes Limited, the position at 1 December 1999 is that there are currently 7,121 families quarters, of which 6,095 are occupied and 1,026 are unoccupied.

Peat

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his Department's policy is on the purchase and use of peat for its own operations and activities; and what performance targets his Department has set to reduce current peat use. [103013]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Peat is not directly used by the MOD in its operations and activities. However, it is possible that some ground maintenance contractors may use peat on the Defence estate. In line with the MOD's Departmental Plan on the Greening Government Initiative, my Department will be looking at bringing in measures to ensure that any use of peat in the maintenance of its grounds is substituted by organic waste. This reflects the advice within the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Greening Operations Guide.

East Timor

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when UK troops first arrived in East Timor to participate in the International Force East Timor; and if he will make a statement. [103056]

Mr. Hoon: The first UK troops arrived in East Timor on 20 September 1999 as part of the International Force (INTERFET).

AWE Aldermaston (Millennium Compliance)

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment has been made of the ability of AWE Aldermaston to cope with the Millennium date change. [103070]

Mr. Spellar: Hunting-BRAE's programme to identify and test all AWE's safety and business-critical systems was completed in July and all necessary changes were made by that date. All but essential services will be shut down prior to the New Year and staff will be on duty over the period to monitor systems and deal with any contingencies that may arise. There will then be a controlled start-up of operations in the New Year.

The extent and effectiveness of the programme have been audited by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, the Ministry of Defence's Compliance Office and Specialist Procurement Services and the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. All have stated that they are satisfied with the action taken.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on what support is available for former and serving personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. [103227]

Mr. Spellar: My Department fully recognise Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a potentially serious and disabling medical condition and provides appropriate treatment and support for serving personnel suffering from this condition. A range of measures aimed at preventing PTSD are in place, including pre- and post-deployment briefings and professional counselling in-theatre.

Service personnel found to be suffering from PTSD will be offered treatment, including, if necessary, in-patient treatment at the Duchess of Kent's Psychiatric Hospital, Catterick. Responsibility for the treatment of ex-service personnel lies with the NHS. Such personnel may, however, be treated at the Duchess of Kent's Psychiatric Hospital if they are referred there as patients under normal NHS arrangements.

Training (International Law)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on what training is provided for *(a)* officers and *(b)* other ranks, on understanding international law. [103228]

Mr. Spellar: Training in aspects of international law, and specifically in the 'Law of Armed Conflict', is provided to both officers and other ranks of all three services as part of initial basic training, in accordance with the requirements of the Hague and Geneva Conventions. Further training in international law, again covering the legitimacy of military operations and on the conduct of waging war, is provided on a wide range of specialist training courses, on both a single service and joint service basis. Furthermore, additional training and briefings

relating to relevant international law are normally provided to formed units of all three services by legal specialists prior to operational deployment.

Departmental Fuel Duty Payments

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much fuel duty his Department has paid in each of the past five years. [102527]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This information is not held centrally and can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Organophosphate Lubricants

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of recent incidents involving health hazards associated with organophosphate lubricants, including the possible involvement of organophosphates in the near accident of a BAe 146 aircraft in Sweden on 12 November, in relation to military aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [103111]

Mr. Spellar: We have no record of any recent military aircraft incidents relating to the use of organophosphate lubricants. The organophosphate compound tricresylphosphate is present in almost all military aero-engine lubricants and, as no viable alternative products are available, appropriate measures are taken to avoid the exposure of air and ground crew to any potential health hazards. We understand that BAe Systems is investigating the incident involving a civil BAe 146 aircraft on 12 November and we will consider any recommendations that emerge.

Military Forces (Northern Ireland)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the overall strength in September *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999 was of military forces in Northern Ireland, broken down into the numbers attached to the (i) RAF, (ii) Royal Navy (iii) RIR, (iv) RIR part-time and (v) others. [101866]

Mr. Spellar: Pursuant to the reply I gave on 15 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 217–18W, it may be helpful to make it clear that, excluding those forces referred to in the footnotes as being based outside Northern Ireland, the strength figures for military forces deployed to the Province are as follows:

	Strength 1998	*Strength 1999*
Army (General Service)	9,557	8,843
Royal Air Force	1,152	1,150
Royal Navy	321	182
The Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service Full-time)	2,627	2,536
The Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service Part-time)	1,961	1,841
Total	15,618	14,552

Smart Trajectory Artillery Round

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the estimated cost of the Smart Trajectory Artillery Round. [103059]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir John Chisholm to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 20 December 1999:

I have been asked to respond to your parliamentary question about the Smart Trajectory Artillery Round (STAR).

The STAR programme is an industry led programme. The team is led by Thomson-Thorn Missiles & Electronics; the other members are BAe Systems Royal Ordnance, Rockwell Collins and DERA. The programme started in 1997 and the first phase, technology demonstration, was completed towards the end of 1999. The purpose of the programme is to develop a product that would satisfy a perceived MOD requirement.

The cost of the STAR fuze is a commercial decision to be taken by the industry team after consideration of the likely full development costs and the size of the potential market for this type of product.

I hope this explains the situation.

HMS Tireless

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Spearfish Mod warshot heavyweight torpedoes are being installed on HMS Tireless. [103058]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Tireless has been converted to carry the Spearfish Heavyweight torpedo. The exact number embarked at any time is determined by the operational requirement.

Jaguar Aircraft

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Jaguar aircraft have been delivered to India *(a)* this year and *(b)* in the last three years. [103055]

Mr. Kilfoyle: None. Since 1979, Jaguar aircraft have been produced under licence in India.

Common Defence

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will state the date and reference of the presentation to Parliament of the latest document he has signed with the French Republic in respect of common defence. [103133]

Mr. Hoon: A declaration on strengthening Europe's military capabilities was issued at the UK-French Summit on 25 November. This declaration can be found in the House of Commons Library as deposited paper DEP99/1908.

Commanding Officers (Territorial Units)

Mr. Brazier: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many commanding officers of territorial units were *(a)* regular officers and *(b)* territorial officers on (i) 1 January, (ii) 1 April, (iii) 1 July and (iv) 1 October. [103401]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

EU Rapid Reaction Force

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Britain's contribution towards the Rapid Reaction Force which was agreed in principle at the Helsinki Conference. [103226]

Mr. Hoon: The recent Helsinki European Council agreed that EU member states, co-operating voluntarily, must be able, by 2003, to deploy within 60 days and sustain for at least one year, military forces of up to 50,000 to 60,000 persons capable of the full range of Petersberg tasks. In particular this will mean developing the capabilities of Europe's existing national forces as the pool from which such a deployment could be drawn for any specific operation. We are not creating a European Army or a standing European Rapid Reaction Force.

The Council also agreed that this headline goal should be elaborated and a method established for defining national contributions. This will be addressed in the coming months.

Departmental Spending Plans

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what variations he has made to the spending plans for his Department announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review in July 1998. [102900]

Mr. Hoon: There have been no variations made to the spending plans announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review in July 1998 other than a small number of minor technical adjustments.

HOME DEPARTMENT

2 Marsham Street

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 9W, on 2 Marsham Street, how much longer he expects these costs to be maintained in order to protect the empty office blocks at 2 Marsham Street. [102989]

Mr. Straw: The next opportunity to review the appropriate level of expenditure will be early summer 2000, following the decision expected to be taken by then on the Private Finance Initiative competition for my Department's central London accommodation strategy. If the competition confirms that redevelopment of the site for the Home Office offers the best solution, it will be transferred to the successful private sector partner for demolition in accordance with the then agreed programme.

Lifeguards

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what representations he has received on making the provision of lifeguards a statutory responsibility for local authorities; [102560]

(2) what plans he has to make the provision of lifeguards on popular tourist beaches a statutory responsibility of local authorities. [102562]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is not aware of any representations on this matter, and there are no current proposals for legislation.

Alcohol Abuse

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his Department spent on alcohol rehabilitation programmes and alcohol abuse prevention programmes in each of the last three years. [102551]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not available. The Home Office has no funding specifically allocated for alcohol rehabilitation programmes or alcohol abuse prevention programmes. The Prison Service addresses alcohol problems within programmes at individual establishments, but does not monitor separately expenditure that is specifically on alcohol-related work.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of arrests made by each police force in England and Wales where alcohol abuse was a factor in each of the last three years. [102554]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not available. A 1998 Home Office research study, "Drugs and crime: the results of research on drug testing and interviewing arrestees" by Trevor Bennett, found that the proportion of arrestees testing positive for alcohol varied over its five test sites, from 8 per cent. to 42 per cent.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in each of the last three years who would otherwise have qualified as refugees have been excluded from protection and refused asylum on the grounds that they have committed acts sufficiently serious to render them as not deserving of protection under the 1951 UN convention relating to the status of refugees. [102778]

Mrs. Roche: I regret that this information could be obtained only by examination of individual case records and is, therefore, available only at disproportionate cost.

Young Prisoners

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many 15 and 16-year-olds are currently held on remand in prison; in which prisons; and what plans he has to end the practice of remanding 15 and 16-year-olds in adult prisons. [102792]

Mr. Boateng: On 31 October, the latest date for which these figures are available, there were 31 15-year-olds and 130 16-year-olds on remand in prison. The table shows where they were held.

	Aged 15	*Aged 16*
Altcourse	—	4
Brinsford	6	27
Cardiff	2	3
Castington	—	5
Doncaster	3	12
Exeter	2	—
Feltham	10	34
Glen Parva	5	19
Gloucester	—	2
Hindley	2	8

	Aged 15	*Aged 16*
Hull	—	2
Lancaster Farms	—	3
Northallerton	1	6
Norwich	—	2
Parc	—	1
Swansea	—	2
Total	31	130

Following a building programme which provided 170 additional places in local authority secure units, in June this year we introduced court ordered secure remands to local authorities for 12 to 16-year-old girls, 12 to 14-year-old boys and 15 and 16-year-old boys who were vulnerable and for whom a place was available.

We are now strengthening bail support, through £35 million Youth Justice Board grants and a statutory duty from April on local authorities to operate appropriate bail support schemes. The Prison Service is investing more than £50 million in creating a distinct juvenile estate which will be able to hold young people on remand where they would be reasonably near to courts. The Youth Justice Board will take over the purchasing and commissioning of secure juvenile accommodation from April, to ensure effective use of available places and to plan for future needs. How far we can reduce remands to prisons in the short-term depends on the total numbers remanded and on overall demands on available accommodation. In the light of proposals from the Board, we will make clear in the New Year what we expect to achieve by when in removing young people on remand from prison accommodation.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Origin)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of the total work force in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102733]

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office set out in his reply on 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 264W, the corporate action that we are taking to encourage the employment of people from ethnic minorities.

The percentage of permanent staff of ethnic minority origin in the Home Office, including the Prison Service, was 5 per cent. on 1 April 1999. The percentage is of those whose ethnic origin was then centrally recorded. More detailed figures are given in the table. Staff provide information on their ethnic origin on a voluntary basis and can choose not to disclose their origin if they so wish.

As part of our commitment to encouraging employment of people of ethnic minority origin, the Home Office published on 28 July 1999 targets for the recruitment, retention and progression of ethnic minority staff over the next ten years. (These cover the core Home Office, Agencies and Services).

To achieve its targets, the Home Office has revised its recruitment literature and attends recruitment fairs specifically aimed at minority ethnic communities. It has and will continue to advertise a number of posts in the ethnic minority press, for example *The Voice, the Ethnic Media Group*, and *Muslim News*. The Home Office participates in the National Mentoring Consortium Scheme for ethnic minority undergraduates and is involved in an informal mentoring scheme for potential ethnic minority Fast Stream candidates. The Department also sponsors the Windsor Fellowship which supports Black and Asian students.

The Prison Service launched the RESPOND programme to promote racial equality for staff and prisoners in February 1999. This includes targets to recruit more staff from the minority ethnic communities. To secure this, a national recruitment outreach team has been formed which will work in partnership with local prisons, for example attending recruitment fairs. The Prison Service will also review its career literature and continue to advertise in the minority ethnic media.

The Home Office recognises that unless it is seen as a fair place to work and in which diversity is valued, recruitment initiatives alone will not encourage people from minority ethnic communities to join the Department. The Home Office is committed to a Race Equality Action Plan that includes race awareness training, a mentoring scheme involving Management Board members and ethnic minority staff and evaluating and monitoring of all Human Resources systems. An Ethnic Minority Network was launched for staff on 24 November 1999 and already has over 500 members. The Home Office also participates in Cabinet Office initiatives on diversity and equality proofing.

Area [1] of employment	*Percentage of ethnic minority staff employed [2]*
Home Office (core areas)	10.9
Immigration and Nationality Department	15.5
Her Majesty's Prison Service	3.3
Fire Service College	0
Forensic Science Service	9.6
United Kingdom Passport Agency	9.1
Home Office average excluding Prison Service	12.4
Home Office average including Prison Service	5.0

[1] The information is that recorded centrally on 1 April 1999.
[2] Percentage is of permanent non-industrial staff whose ethnicities are recorded.

Kosovo

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reimburse local authorities for their expenditure on the Kosovan Humanitarian Evacuation Programme. [103721]

Mr. Straw: I have laid before Parliament today a Special Grant Report which sets out the arrangements for reimbursing local authorities in England for the additional expenditure which they may have incurred in respect of the Kosovan evacuees who arrived in the United Kingdom as part of the United National Humanitarian Evacuation Programme.

The Special Grant Report explains the areas of expenditure which will be eligible for the grant and the timescales for local authorities to make their claims. I very much hope that a significant proportion of the local authorities' expenditure in respect of the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme will be reimbursed within the current financial year.

Holocaust Remembrance Day

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when he will make a statement on the outcome of the consultation on the Holocaust Remembrance Day proposal; [103040]

(2) how many representations he has received in response to the consultation document on Holocaust Remembrance Day; [103039]

(3) in response to the consultation on the proposal for a Holocaust Remembrance Day, *(a)* which organisations and public bodies have submitted responses and *(b)* how many responses have been received from private individuals. [103402]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: 521 responses were received, 237 from local authorities and other organisations and 284 from individuals.

The Government intend to announce their decision in January, as stated in the consultation document.

Departmental Funding

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on extra funding for his Department from Government reserves; and if he will make a statement. [103330]

Mr. Straw: I regularly discuss with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury progress on the Public Service Agreements (PSA) whose delivery is supported by Home Office funding. Recent discussions on the PSA objectives to reduce crime and the fear of crime resulted in the announcements made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minster and me of additional investments funded from the Reserve and the Capital Modernisation Fund. These will cover £34 million for the DNA database and £35 million for the first year costs of a scheme for 5,000 more police recruits over the next three years.

Firemen

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is a condition of service that retained firemen must record on job applications or inform their existing employers of their Fire Service obligations. [102898]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The National Joint Council for local authorities' fire brigades, which comprises representatives from the fire authority employers and the employees, is the standing body charged with the supervision, from a national point of view, of questions affecting the conditions of service of firefighters. The Council has confirmed that there are no contractual obligations on retained firefighters in respect of other employers in its Scheme of Conditions of Service.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 22 September on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Birkbeck. [103082]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 16 December in response to his letter of 22 September on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. Birkbeck. I am extremely sorry that I was unable to do so sooner, and would like, through the right hon. Member, to extend my apology to Mrs. Birkbeck for the delay.

Fire Service College

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received the report of the Fire Service College Prior Options Review; and if he will make a statement. [103720]

Mr. Straw: Against the background of the continuing shortfall of the Fire Service College in meeting its financial targets, I commissioned a prior options review in March 1999. I asked the review team to evaluate the performance of the College; and taking account of developments since it was established, reappraise the options for achieving best value for money in the provision of central training for the United Kingdom fire service.

I have now received the Report of the review and arranged for its publication. Copies of the Report have been placed in the Library.

The review considered various organisational options for providing central training for the United Kingdom fire service. They took account of the College's track record as an Agency; its shortage of key skills and experience; and the need for decisive action to tackle the problems identified, including the requirement for significant capital investment if we are to keep the College viable. The review was conscious of the need to increase training throughput at the College and suggested that there would be additional significant benefits from joining up the activities of the Home Office and Ministry of Defence (MOD) Fire Services Central Training Establishment, at Manston.

The review concluded that the option most likely to restore the College to viability would be to end the College's Agency status and replace it with a partnership with the private sector. The Report therefore, recommends that a three way partnership should be established between the Home Office, the MOD and the private sector for the delivery of fire service training and to exploit fully the College site and facilities.

The public sector would continue to have a close involvement by having in the College officers seconded from the United Kingdom Fire Service and from the MOD. The Report also recommends that the College should be reviewed regularly by Her Majesty's Fire Services' Inspectorate. This would parallel the arrangements that exist in Scotland for inspecting the Scottish Fire Service Training School at Gullane. It would also provide the Home Office with a source of expertise to assist with the monitoring and management of a future partnership agreement.

I am grateful to the review team for the work they have undertaken. I welcome their findings, their thorough and careful analysis of the College's problems and their recommendations. I am accepting immediately their recommendation that in future the College should be

reviewed by Her Majesty's Fire Services' Inspectorate and I have asked the Chief Inspector to inspect and report on the College regularly.

After this thorough review, and years of difficulties, it is very important that the College's problems are now gripped firmly and tackled expeditiously. I have agreed with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence that joining up the activities of the College with those of the Ministry of Defence Fire Services Central Training Establishment, in partnership with the private sector, holds the potential to bring benefit to all parties concerned and should be urgently explored. I am also commencing consultations today with the College, the Fire Service and other stakeholders on this and other recommendations in the report. I will also be seeking advice from the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council.

I am inviting views by the 18 February 2000.

National Security

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to implement the policies announced on 25 January to protect the national infrastructure against electronic attack. [103719]

Mr. Straw: A range of initiatives has been taken. Departments have been asked to ensure that their own key systems will achieve independently assessable standards of security. Discussions are being held with a number of private sector organisations in order to identify the systems on which the national infrastructure critically depends, to assess and reduce their vulnerabilities, and to establish contingency arrangements. In order to take this forward, I have established an interdepartmental centre, the National Infrastructure Security Co-ordination Centre, to act as a point of contact for those involved in this work in both government and the private sector.

Electoral Costs

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the cost of a person casting their vote at a polling station. [102544]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Records of the administrative costs of casting a vote at a polling station and by post are not kept separately.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the cost of registering an elector on the electoral register in England and Wales; and what is the cost of entering a name to correct an omission from the register. [102545]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The overall cost of registration of electors in England and Wales is estimated at about £40 million per year; or approximately a pound for each elector. The cost of making a single correction would not be very much greater.

Air Guns

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many incidents of violent crime involving air guns there have been in each of the past 10 years; [102611]

(2) how many *(a)* fatalities and *(b)* woundings involving air rifles there have been in each of the past 10 years. [102612]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The following table gives the readily available information on the number of recorded violent crimes in which air weapons were reported to have been used (no distinction between air guns and air rifles is possible in the statistics collected centrally):

Recorded violent crime in which air weapons were reported to have been used in England and Wales

Year	*Homicide*	*Attempted murder and other acts (including wounding) endangering life*	*Other wounding and violence against the person*	*Robbery*	*Total violent crime*[1]
1989	3	146	1,701	90	1,940
1990	1	191	1,656	122	1,970
1991	2	192	1,545	156	1,895
1992	—	207	1,637	151	1,995
1993	—	200	1,504	131	1,835
1994	—	207	1,510	115	1,832
1995	1	186	1,350	112	1,649
1996	—	121	1,303	81	1,505
1997	—	75	1,374	99	1,548
1998	—	61	1,806	81	1,948

[1] Excludes sexual offences, few in number, and not separately identifiable in later years

Figures for 1998 are not directly comparable with those for previous years because the coverage of recorded crime was extended and new counting rules employed from 1 April 1998.

Prison (North Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to establish a prison in the north of Wales to enable prisoners from that area to be held within reach of their own communities. [102497]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has no plans to build a prison in North Wales. Altcourse, the new prison in Liverpool, provides places for prisoners from that area.

Hackney Carriage Drivers

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what powers the Metropolitan Police considers complaints against hackney carriage drivers in Greater London levelled by members of the general public. [102453]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan police tells me that Assistant Commissioner Paul Manning, who is the Licensing Authority for hackney carriage drivers within the Metropolitan police district, considers complaints against drivers under paragraph 30(1) of the London Cab Order 1934.

Overseas Electors

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the number of British citizens eligible to register as overseas electors; [102517]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of British citizens resident outside the UK who have resided outside the UK for more than 20 years; [102515]

(3) what estimate he has made of the number of British citizens eligible to register as overseas electors who have resided outside the United Kingdom for *(a)* five years or less and *(b)* more than five years, but less than (i) 10 years, (ii) 15 years and (iii) 20 years. [102516]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: British citizens resident abroad are not required to give us details of their length of stay or their eligibility to register as voters. The information is, therefore, not available.

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100151]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Home Office commissions social research externally to support its work on development and evaluation of policy. There is no veto over the publication of the results except where there are security implications for the Department or other Home Office Agencies; there is an expectation that the research will usually be published with departmental consent. Consultancies are used primarily for the peer review of research data and quality control. In each case, Home Office staff will agree with the contractor the arrangements for publication including its timing. The Home Office may comment on the style and detail of results that are presented in departmental publications. With departmental agreement contractors may, and are often encouraged to make their own arrangements for external publication. Copyright remains with the Home Office.

The Home Office also undertakes a range of scientific research. There is no veto over the publication of the results, except where there are security implications for the Department, and no departmental control over the date of publication, other than the Department requiring a period after the submission of the final report for quality assurance. There is no requirement that the final results incorporate departmental amendments save those necessary to correct factual inaccuracies.

A copy of the table showing the information available centrally on research contracts let has been placed in the Library.

UK Passport

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will consult the public to establish whether there is demand for a hardback UK passport. [102916]

Mrs. Roche: There are no plans to do so. Most countries in the world issue passports which are not hardbacked. The soft covered passport is flexible, more convenient to carry and is easier and quicker to produce. Passports are produced to an International Civil Aviation Authority standard which is designed to ease travellers passage through passport controls. Producing passports in a standardised format greatly facilitates this. Re-introducing a hardback United Kingdom passport would require costly changes to the passport manufacturing process.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will investigate the cost of re-introducing an optional hardback UK passport. [102914]

Mrs. Roche: There are no plans to do so. To introduce an optional hardback version of the United Kingdom passport would require significant changes to the passport manufacturing process, and would increase the costs of the Passport Service. There are over 30 million of the soft covered United Kingdom passports in circulation and most countries in the world issue passports in this form. A standard passport format greatly facilitates worldwide travel.

Glasgow Airport Immigration Service

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on when the Glasgow Airport Immigration Service will be re-opened to the public. [102851]

Mrs. Roche: The core business of the Immigration Service at Glasgow Airport is coverage of the arrivals controls by immigration officers and this is operating normally.

The Public Enquiry Office (PEO) is a discrete section which is staffed by general and administrative grades and deals mainly with people subject to immigration control who are already in the country and require extensions of stay. This facility has been closed since 22 November 1999 because of a staffing shortfall. As soon as this shortfall is remedied, the office will re-open. No firm date can be given but the local manager hopes this will be very early in the new year.

Corporate Manslaughter

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received the conclusions of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Corporate Manslaughter; and if he will make a statement. [103580]

Mr. Boateng: We have received the report of the inter-departmental working group of officials which has been considering the recommendations made in the Law Commission's report no. 237, "Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter". The Law Commission's report included a recommendation that there should be a new offence of corporate killing.

We are considering the recommendations of the working group and will consult our colleagues on how to take the matter forward.

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department of those people who were arrested as a result of actions they took during the visit by the President of China, how many are *(a)* on bail, *(b)* in custody, *(c)* have had charges against them proved and *(d)* were released without charge. [103222]

Mr. Boateng: 15 persons were arrested by the Metropolitan Police and one by the City of London Police in connection with the President of China's visit. (This figure excludes three people arrested for being drunk and disorderly or for possession of drugs at the scene of the visit). One individual was arrested twice. Of these 16 individuals, all were released without charge, and hence none is on bail, in custody, or has had charges against them proved; four of them did however receive police cautions.

Political Asylum

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of applications for political asylum in the United Kingdom for each month from January 1997 to November 1999. [103380]

Mrs. Roche: The available information is given in the table.

Applications [1,2] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, January 1997 to November 1999

Number of principal applicants

	1997	*1998*	*1999*
January	2,715	2,860	[3]4,700
February	2,475	2,650	[3]4,185
March	2,160	3,200	[3]5,060
April	2,665	3,135	[3]4,905
May	2,590	3,110	[3]5,370
June	2,585	3,575	[3]6,130
July	3,070	4,215	[3]6,440
August	2,930	4,420	[3]7,120
September	2,850	4,455	[3]7,355
October	2,990	5,010	[3]6,295
November	2,345	4,620	n/a
December	3,120	4,770	n/a
Total	32,500	46,015	—

[1] Figures do not include overseas applications.
[2] Figures rounded to the nearest 5.
[3] Provisional figures.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to re-assess regularly the baseline figure of planned police recruits during the life of the Crime Fighting Fund; and if he will make a statement. [103333]

Mr. Boateng: In order to establish baseline figures for projected recruitment over the next three years, we have asked forces for details of their recruitment plans for each of those years.

To continue to receive funding for further additional officers for years two and three, police forces will need to demonstrate that the first year's funding has been used to recruit and deploy the additional numbers agreed for front line policing and that they have met the other continuation criteria set out in the Bidding Guidelines, a copy of which was placed in the Library on 2 December. Forces will be asked in October 2000 and again in October 2001, to provide the information requested to demonstrate that they have met the continuation criteria.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the funds which will need to be available through the Crime Fighting Fund in year two and year three in order for police forces to be able to recruit a total of 5,000 officers; and if he will make a statement; [103328]

(2) what additional funding will be made available for the Crime Fighting Fund in year two and year three; and if he will make a statement. [103329]

Mr. Boateng: £35 million of new money has been allocated to kick-start the scheme in year one and further sums will be made available in years two and three. It is impossible to say at this stage how much funding will be needed in years two and three as we do not yet know how forces will spread their bids over the three year period of the scheme.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to make funding available for the retention of police officers recruited through the Crime Fighting Fund; and if he will make a statement. [103331]

Mr. Boateng: The Crime Fighting Fund will provide for the recruitment and retention of officers over the three year period from April 2000. Funding per recruit will be based on the aggregate annual cost of a new police constable up to a maximum of £32,500 for a Police Officer recruited to a force other than the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS): £35,130 for a Metropolitan Police Service recruit. Those sums include the following: £17,900 (pay); £1,300 Earning Related National Insurance Contributions (ERNIC); £5,300 (pension); a contribution to training and £1,000 for recruitment.

The salary, ERNIC and pension costs of police officers who are recruited under the Crime Fighting Fund will continue to be paid for the three year period of the scheme. In the longer term all pressures on police funds, including these new officers, will be reflected in bids my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will make during the 2000 Spending Review.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police forces are not recruiting new police recruits; and if he will make a statement. [103332]

Mr. Boateng: Timing of recruitment is a matter for the individual forces concerned. The information we have is that 28 forces in England and Wales are recruiting new police recruits at the current time.

Kosovan Refugees

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Metropolitan Police and social services departments in London regarding begging activities in London by women claiming to be Kosovan refugees using children and babies. [103211]

Mr. Boateng: There have been no recent discussions between my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Metropolitan Police or London social services departments about begging, begging with children or foreign nationals begging.

Begging in a public place is an offence and therefore, within the Metropolitan Police District, it is an operational matter for the Commissioner. He tells me that there is a dedicated police unit at Charing Cross which deals with

begging and rough sleepers; this unit works in association with other relevant agencies. The Metropolitan Police do not monitor data on the number of foreign nationals arrested for begging.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Toyota

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations in relation to Toyota he has made to *(a)* the Monetary Policy Committee and *(b)* Members of the Monetary Policy Committee regarding the (i) value of sterling and (ii) level of UK interest rates. [103038]

Mr. Alan Johnson: None.

Mobile Telephones

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will announce the date for the auction of new mobile telephone licences. [102152]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Information Memorandum for the auction of Third Generation mobile communication Wireless Telegraphy Act licences published on 1 November set out an indicative auction timetable in which applications are to be received on 12 January and the auction starts in early March. The Notice, which confirms the date for receipt of applications as 12 January, will be issued on 22 December.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about the proposed auction of new mobile phone licences; and if he will make a statement. [102154]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government have received numerous representations on the auction of Third Generation mobile communication Wireless Telegraphy Act licences. These have been taken into account in decisions relating to the auction.

Telecommunications Fraud

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps are being taken by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* Oftel to prevent telecommunications fraud, with particular reference to the use of high cost line and call charges. [102837]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The regulation of the telecommunications industry is a matter for the Office of Telecommunications (Oftel). Oftel takes telecoms operators' network integrity very seriously. Oftel will always investigate any case of alleged telephone fraud.

The Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS) regulates high cost telephone lines through its Code of Practice, with which Premium Rate Service Providers have to comply. The Code has a number of provisions relating to both the advertising for and the content of services, which are designed to counter fraudulent provision and use of such services.

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102043]

Mr. Byers: On 1 April 1999, the percentage of staff who had notified the Department of a disability represented 4.2 per cent. of all staff. This included staff in DTI Headquarters, but excluded casual staff and staff in Government Offices and Executive Agencies.

The Department's external recruitment is through fair and open competition with selection on merit. We ensure that our recruitment processes are adapted to meet the requirements of disabled applicants.

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he will urge the World Trade Organisation to adopt in respect of environment and labour standards in order to ensure that free trade is fair and sustainable. [103099]

Mr. Caborn: Although the recent WTO meeting in Seattle did not launch a new round of trade negotiations, the UK, alongside its EU partners, will continue to press for negotiations to clarify the relationship between Multilateral Environmental Agreements and WTO rules; to clarify the rules on environmental labelling; and to examine the scope for taking into account the precautionary principle in WTO rules in relation to environmental risks. The UK will continue to press for a joint forum of the ILO and WTO to consider trade, globalisation and labour issues.

Regulated Industries (Consumer Charges)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on employment of decisions taken by regulators on the prices charged to consumers by the regulated industries. [103051]

Mrs. Liddell: Decisions on the form and level of price controls are matters for the sectoral regulators. In telecommunications, electricity, and gas, the independent industry regulators have statutory duties which govern the way in which they conduct their business. These are set out in the relevant legislation. Decisions taken by the regulated companies in response to proposals by the regulators are for the commercial judgment of the companies. If companies are not prepared to accept the regulator's proposals, they can reject them, and the regulator can then refer the proposals to the Competition Commission for a full review.

Manufacturing (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many manufacturing businesses were operating in Worcestershire during 1998. [103309]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There were 2,070 VAT registered businesses operating in the manufacturing sector in Worcestershire at the end of 1998.

Electricity

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his proposed date is for the dissolution of the electricity pool and the commencement of the electricity trading arrangements. [103014]

Mrs. Liddell: The target for the implementation of the new electricity trading arrangements is autumn 2000.

Gas Disconnections

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the number of gas disconnections. [102725]

Mrs. Liddell: Figures from the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM) indicate that in the first nine months of 1999 there were 15,500 gas disconnections for debt. Based on this trend the Regulator is hopeful that the total number of gas disconnections in 1999 should not exceed 20,000, representing a large fall compared to 1998 when there were nearly 30,000 gas disconnections. The Regulator will monitor the number of disconnections closely and has, in his Social Action Plan, set out a number of actions which should continue to place downward pressure on the number of disconnections.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102339]

Mr. Byers: Where the Department is the major or sole occupier of a building provision is made for rest/first aid rooms and in most buildings there is a dedicated smoking room or area. No specific provision is made for religious observance, but staff can and do use meeting rooms for such purposes. Where the Department is a minor occupier of a building, provision of rooms or areas for purposes such as these will often be shared between all the occupiers.

Offshore Wind Farms

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the implementation of licensing of offshore wind farms. [103478]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government are exploring what regime might be most appropriate for consents and licensing for offshore wind farms following the earlier consultation with the industry and interested parties.

The location of offshore wind farms will need to take account of developers' wishes, the suitability of particular sites, and the availability of the various planning consents.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many submissions were received by the Export Credits Guarantee Department during the recent consultation exercise on its mission and status; if these submissions will be made public; and if he will place a list of the submissions in the Library. [103066]

Mr. Caborn: A total of 241 responses were received to the Public Consultation Document circulated in relation to the Review of the Mission and Status of ECGD, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced to the House on 27 July 1999, *Official Report,* columns 305–06W. As indicated in the Consultation Document, it is intended that a summary of the responses, a number of which were provided on a confidential basis, will be published and placed in the Library of the House.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his policy on taking environmental factors into account when granting export credit guarantees. [103215]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD takes environmental factors into account in all relevant cases. Environmentally sensitive cases are considered in conjunction with other relevant Departments.

On 23 November, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced a screening process to help to identify environmentally sensitive cases at an early stage.

Ilisu Dam

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 23W, on the Ilisu dam, when he will make a decision on the application for export credit support; and if he will make a statement. [103234]

Mr. Caborn: The application for ECGD support for the UK participation in the Ilisu Dam project has given rise to a number of social, political, environmental and cultural issues requiring further consideration between ECGD, the other export credit agencies involved, the Turkish authorities and the contractors. A decision on the application will not be taken until the issues have been satisfactorily resolved.

Post Office (Benefit Payments)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effect on rural post offices of plans to pay benefits directly into claimants' bank accounts; and if he will make a statement. [102710]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The automation of the Post Office Counters Ltd. network, which is due for completion by the spring of 2001, will enable the Post Office to extend its arrangements with the high street banks to offer a range of banking facilities at post offices. This will mean that benefit recipients who wish to access their benefits in cash at post offices will continue to be able to do so, both before and after the migration of benefit payments to automated credit transfer from 2003, while other bank customers will benefit from the wider availability of banking facilities, particularly in rural areas.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the unit cost to Post Office Counters Ltd. of processing a benefit payment by *(a)* voucher, *(b)* Girocheque and *(c)* payable order. [103143]

Mr. Alan Johnson: This information is in commercial confidence between the Post Office and the Benefits Agency.

Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* coalminers and *(b)* coalminers' widows are entitled to compensation as a result of suffering from emphysema or chronic bronchitis; and how many of them have received (i) full and (ii) partial compensation payments. [103061]

Mrs. Liddell: As of 16 December the Department has received 62,541 claims from living miners. We have made 645 full and final payments totalling some £1.9 million and 14,519 interim payments totalling some £28.5 million.

In addition, the Department has received 28,879 claims on behalf of deceased miners. This figure includes miner's widows and their dependants. We are unable to differentiate between the claims at this stage. However, we have made 1,149 bereavement awards to widows totalling over £10 million.

The Department will not know the total number of claimants who are entitled to compensation for some time. These figures will not be available until claims have been received and fully assessed.

Post Office (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will take steps to prevent post office closures in rural Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [102689]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are committed to the maintenance of a nationwide network of post offices and will, for the first time, publish access criteria which the new Regulator will have a duty to monitor. The criteria will aim to ensure that everyone in the UK has reasonable access to post office counter services. The Government are making a substantial contribution to the costs of automating the counters network to strengthen the viability of the network in the longer term and the Performance and Innovation Unit in the Cabinet Office is carrying out an urgent study on the post office network. Various rate relief schemes apply to many rural post offices.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post offices have closed in each parliamentary constituency in Scotland in each of the last five years. [102688]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that historic information on the number of post office closures in each parliamentary constituency is not held and cannot be readily compiled. The number of post offices closed in Scotland in 1998–99 was 21.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post offices there were in each Scottish parliamentary constituency in each of the last five years. [102687]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that historic information on the number of post offices in each parliamentary constituency is not held and cannot be readily compiled. They have supplied the numbers of post offices in each Scottish parliamentary constituency as at October 1999 and these are set out as follows:

Constituency	*Number of post offices*
Aberdeen Central	17
Aberdeen North	12
Aberdeen South	17
Airdrie and Shotts	21
Angus	24
Argyll and Bute	88
Ayr	19
Banff and Buchan	40
Caithness Sutherland and Easter Ross	53
Carrick Cumnock and Doon Valley	39
Central Fife	20
Clydebank and Milngavie	11
Clydesdale	31
Coatbridge and Chryston	18
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	13
Cunninghame North	27
Cunninghame South	14
Dumbarton	30
Dumfries	45
Dundee East	18
Dundee West	13
Dunfermline East	25
Dunfermline West	25
East Kilbride	12
East Lothian	28
Eastwood	16
Edinburgh Central	20
Edinburgh East and Musselburgh	21
Edinburgh North and Leith	22
Edinburgh Pentlands	16
Edinburgh South	17
Edinburgh West	22
Falkirk East	22
Falkirk West	23
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	59
Glasgow Anniesland	14
Glasgow Baillieston	13
Glasgow Cathcart	13
Glasgow Govan	16
Glasgow Kelvin	23
Glasgow Maryhill	11
Glasgow Pollock	14
Glasgow Rutherglen	16
Glasgow Shettleston	11
Glasgow Springburn	18
Gordon	37
Greenock and Inverclyde	19
Hamilton North and Bellshill	14
Hamilton South	10
Inverness East Nairn and Lochaber	59
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	20
Kirkcaldy	21
Linlithgow	16
Livingston	22
Midlothian	22
Moray	37
Motherwell and Wishaw	17
North East Fife	35
North Tayside	50
Ochil	24
Orkney and Shetland	74
Paisley North	15
Paisley South	17
Perth	31
Ross Skye and Inverness West	84
Roxburgh and Berwickshire	42
Stirling	37
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	17
Tweeddale Ettrick and Lauderdale	32
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	45
West Renfrewshire	17
Western Isles	68

Industrial Relations Act 1999

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Industrial Relations Act 1999. [102761]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Work is continuing on the implementation process described in the answer which I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) on 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 613W.

In particular, the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations (SI 1999/3312) have come into force, on 15 December, together with the new rights to time off for dependants.

We have also advertised appointments to the Central Arbitration Committee, the new members of which are expected to be in place in time for the introduction of the new statutory recognition procedures shortly after Easter.

Oil Pollution

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the oil pollution incidents in the Irish Sea from March to the present, stating the date and the size of the incident, the name of the company which reported it and the name of the company which was responsible for the spill. [102590]

Mrs. Liddell: The information relating to oil spill incidents in the Irish Sea Basin, reported to the Department of Trade and Industry, from March to the present date is as follows:

Date	*Operator*	*Reported by:*	*Report on third party*[1]	*Amount (tonnes)*
2 March 1999	BHP	Operator	—	1.0000
6 March 1999	BHP	Operator	—	1.0000
9 March 1999	BHP	Operator	—	Unknown
13 March 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.1500
21 March 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	Unknown
25 March 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	0.0045
6 April 1999	BHP	Haliburton	Yes	4.0000
7 April 1999	BG	Operator	—	0.0039
11 April 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	Unknown
12 April 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	0.2500
26 April 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0005
8 May 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	2.0000
13 June 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0001
2 July 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0005
3 July 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0005
12 July 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0000
17 July 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	Unknown
25 July 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	0.5000
3 August 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	0.0005
13 August 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0005
14 August 1999	BG	Operator	—	0.0119
16 September 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0005
29 September 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.2500
29 October 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0005
3 November 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	0.0005
4 November 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0002
13 November 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	0.0005
21 November 1999	BHP	Operator	Yes	0.5000
4 December 1999	BHP	Operator	—	0.0002

[1] Report on third party indicates that the operator reporting was not responsible for the spill incident.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what motor mileage allowance rates his Department offers to *(a)* ministers and *(b)* civil servants using their own vehicles for official business; and what has been the cost of each in each of the last five years. [98708]

Dr. Reid: The information requested for the Scotland Office is set out in the table. Ministers, when travelling on official business, may use a private car instead of an official car, and claim mileage allowance in the same circumstances and on the same terms as civil servants. Expenditure relating to mileage allowance is shown from 1 December 1997. Prior to this the information could not be disaggregated from other expenditure on travel and accommodation without disproportionate costs in staff time. From 1 December 1997 to 31 March 1998 expenditure (rounded to the nearest £000) was £162,000. For the year 1998–99 expenditure was £561,000.

Year	*Motor mileage allowance per mile*
1994–95	32p
1995–96	32p
1996–97	32p
1997–98	33p
1998–99	34p

For official mileage above 7,499 miles in the income tax year a personal income tax liability occurs.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years; [98706]

(2) how much his Department has spent on civil servants' transport in each of the last two years. [98707]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 255W, detailing Government Car Service costs in each of the past two years. In addition to these costs private car hire costs for Scotland Office Ministers were £25,000 in 1997–98 and £45,000 in 1998–99 respectively.

The estimated total expenditure on Scotland Office civil servants' transport was £3,916,000 in 1997–98 and £3,126,000 in 1998–99. All travel undertaken by civil servants complies with the requirements of the Civil Service Management Code.

Most of this expenditure relates to functions which, since 1 July, have been transferred to the Scottish Executive.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100159]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Information about individual research contracts could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The various Departments within the Scottish Executive have their own devolved research programmes and strategies. While there are some differences in the precise detail of contracts relating to each programme, generally, researchers are actively encouraged to publish their work.

Special Advisers

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many departmental special advisers have been given severance packages when leaving employment in Scotland in the last 12 months; what amount has been paid to them; and what conditions were attached to the payment. [102917]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* Before the Scottish Parliament elections, four Special Advisers received severance pay in line with the long-standing rules which have applied under previous Administrations. The conditions relating to the payment of severance pay are set out in the Model Contract of Employment for Special Advisers, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. The total paid amounted to £53,026.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Post Offices

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99550]

Mr. Wills: The Department uses post offices on an occasional basis only, for the delivery of specific public messages. This can take the form of displaying leaflets for the public to select or be issued by counter staff, to putting out rolling messages through television or digital displays inside main posts offices.

The frequency of using post offices for communicating with the public in this way is dependent on both the content of the message and on the target audience. It is not clear therefore whether this type of activity will increase or decrease over the next five years. What is likely, in terms of communications generally, is a gradual decrease in paper communications such as leaflets and a corresponding increase in digital/electronic forms of communication.

We do not provide any other business for post offices and this is unlikely to change in the future. We do however have significant business with Royal Mail and Parcelforce who provide the bulk of our mail collection and delivery service.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102377]

Mr. Wills: Decisions on the arrangements to and format for minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what date, in October 1998 he met the then Irish Minister for Education and Science. [103150]

Mr. Wills: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met Michael Martin in Dublin on 27 and 28 October 1998 to discuss bilateral co-operation in education.

Higher Education Students

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for each year since 1990, what has been the *(a)* number and *(b)* proportion of applications for enrolment in higher education institutions in England from *(a)* men, *(b)* women and *(c)* ethnic minorities. [101946]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The information available, as given in the following tables, covers only those who apply for places through the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) and its predecessor organisations the Universities Central Council for Admissions (UCCA) and the Polytechnics and Colleges Admissions Service (PCAS).

UK domiciled applicants and acceptances to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses in the UK

Year of entry [1]	Total accepted applicants	Total applicants	of which: Men (number)	Women (number)	Men (percentage)	Women (percentage)
1990 via UCCA	99,377	193,704	97,412	96,292	50	50
1990 via PCAS	77,539	184,771	95,059	89,712	51	49
1991 via UCCA	106,717	207,324	101,632	105,692	49	51
1991 via PCAS	94,465	214,320	109,562	104,758	51	49
1992 via UCCA	117,976	241,660	116,901	124,759	48	52
1992 via PCAS	125,590	286,420	141,451	144,969	49	51
1993 via UCCA	127,476	263,341	127,627	135,714	48	52
1993 via PCAS	130,596	304,716	151,171	153,545	50	50
1994	251,292	365,323	179,449	185,874	49	51
1995	265,536	369,701	179,602	190,099	49	51
1996	268,289	364,885	175,479	189,406	48	52
1997	303,318	398,327	190,040	208,287	48	52
1998	298,220	389,588	184,069	205,519	47	53
1999	303,065	388,691	182,405	206,286	47	53

[1] In the years up to 1993 some students applied to both UCCA and PCAS. From 1994 onwards all applications are through UCAS. From 1997 onwards the figures include students applying for Art and Design courses which were included in the UCAS scheme for the first time in this year.
Via UCCA

Year of entry [1]	Total accepted applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate course with known ethnicity	Total applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses with known ethnicity	Of which, those from ethnic minorities [2] Number	Percentage
1990 via UCCA	96,946	188,281	19,750	10
1990 via PCAS	64,482	166,650	23,993	14
1991 via UCCA	104,075	201,780	21,548	11

Year of entry[1]	Total accepted applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate course with known ethnicity	Total applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses with known ethnicity	Of which, those from ethnic minorities[2]	
			Number	Percentage
1991 via PCAS	81,811	200,304	28,326	14
1992 via UCCA	113,522	231,434	26,031	11
1992 via PCAS	106,096	261,034	34,997	13
1993 via UCCA	124,339	255,347	28,652	11
1993 via PCAS	108,522	279,041	36,522	13
1994	241,867	350,250	46,185	13
1995	254,373	352,025	48,620	14
1996	254,431	344,990	51,447	15
1997	283,548	371,279	56,142	15
1998	274,824	357,184	56,257	16
1999	280,065	358,081	58,461	16

[1] In the years up to 1993 some students applied to both UCCA and PCAS. From 1994 onwards all applications are through UCAS. From 1997 onwards the figures include students applying for Art and Design courses which were included in the UCAS scheme for the first time in this year.

[2] Covers the following ethnic groups: Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Other, Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Asian Bangladeshi, Asian Chinese, Asian Other, Other (non-white) ethnic origin.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) for each year since 1990, what (i) number and (ii) proportion of applicants for *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time courses in higher education institutions in England came from low-income family backgrounds; [101944]

(2) for each year since 1990, what (i) number and (b) proportion of *(a)* full-time students and *(b)* part-time students enrolling in higher education institutions in England came from low-income family backgrounds. [101945]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The information available on full-time students, as given in the following table, covers only those who apply through the Universities and colleges Admission Service (UCAS) and its predecessor organisations the Universities Central Council for Admissions (UCCA) and the Polytechnic and Colleges Admissions Service (PCAS). Data on the family backgrounds of part-time students are not held centrally.

UK Domiciled students applying to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses in the UK

Year of entry[1]	Accepted applicants from social classes IIIM, IV and V		Applicants from social classes IIIM, IV and V	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1990 via UCCA	17,202	19	36,354	21
1990 via PCAS[2]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1991 via UCCA	18,548	19	39,914	22
1991 via PCAS	19,599	29	45,996	27
1992 via UCCA	23,504	21	54,664	25
1992 via PCAS	29,806	31	70,036	30
1993 via UCCA	26,962	22	64,390	26
1993 via PCAS	34,100	33	82,142	31
1994	63,472	27	97,332	29
1995	67,360	28	98,344	30
1996	65,671	27	93,608	29
1997	73,931	28	100,839	29
1998	72,228	28	97,211	29
1999	73,109	28	96,796	29

[1] In the years up to 1993, some students applied to both UCCA and PCAS. From 1994 onwards all applications are through UCAS. From 1997 onwards the figures include students applying for Art and Design courses which were included in the UCAS scheme for the first time in this year.

[2] The family background of students was not collected by PCAS in 1990.

City Technology Colleges

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to expand the network of city technology colleges. [102194]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The current network of City Technology Colleges (CTCs) is an important part of the Government's strategy to promote diversity with excellence within a modernised comprehensive system. That strategy includes the provision of new and exciting ICT rich learning environments for our city children through the expansion of the specialist schools programme and the establishment by September 2000 of 32 City Learning Centres under our Excellence in Cities initiative.

The role of existing CTCs will continue to develop, in particular by helping to spread innovation and best practice more widely to schools and communities.

SSAs

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will give the standard spending assessment per pupil for the primary and secondary sectors by local education authority for England and Wales for 2000–01. [102694]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table sets out the information for England only. The figures in this table are the subject of consultation with local authorities, and are therefore provisional. Funding for education in Wales is the responsibility for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

2000–01 primary and secondary provisional SSA allocations per pupil

LEA name	LEA number	Primary SSA/5–10 pupil (£)	Secondary SSA/11–15 pupil (£)
City of London	201	3,391.50	21,489.52
Camden	202	3,488.40	4,352.99
Greenwich	203	3,285.98	4,237.21
Hackney	204	3,661.53	4,917.56
Hammersmith and Fulham	205	3,465.44	4,445.77

2000–01 primary and secondary provisional SSA allocations per pupil

LEA name	LEA number	Primary SSA/5–10 pupil (£)	Secondary SSA/11–15 pupil (£)
Islington	206	3,543.19	4,652.76
Kensington and Chelsea	207	3,552.89	4,363.98
Lambeth	208	3,678.49	5,138.06
Lewisham	209	3,415.93	4,438.66
Southwark	210	3,522.63	4,567.41
Tower Hamlets	211	3,701.43	4,799.02
Wandsworth	212	3,185.72	4,100.37
Westminster	213	3,377.07	4,096.25
Barking and Dagenham	301	2,802.52	3,659.43
Barnet	302	2,664.25	3,366.79
Bexley	303	2,534.70	3,255.94
Brent	304	3,058.95	3,980.07
Bromley	305	2,499.67	3,178.84
Croydon	306	2,731.31	3,559.12
Ealing	307	2,885.42	3,785.55
Enfield	308	2,763.15	3,510.90
Haringey	309	3,172.31	4,159.48
Harrow	310	2,620.28	3,412.02
Havering	311	2,493.95	3,223.63
Hillingdon	312	2,626.13	3,372.88
Hounslow	313	2,817.50	3,559.23
Kingston upon Thames	314	2,500.68	3,194.72
Merton	315	2,677.35	3,450.44
Newham	316	3,195.87	4,109.94
Redbridge	317	2,674.91	3,428.67
Richmond upon Thames	318	2,458.25	3,118.53
Sutton	319	2,549.95	3,198.99
Waltham Forest	320	2,945.88	3,785.26
Birmingham	330	2,622.84	3,410.46
Coventry	331	2,474.10	3,192.71
Dudley	332	2,257.71	2,905.26
Sandwell	333	2,478.68	3,212.57
Solihull	334	2,250.01	2,874.32
Walsall	335	2,392.02	3,071.29
Wolverhampton	336	2,498.35	3,233.09
Knowsley	340	2,762.39	3,650.44
Liverpool	341	2,725.80	3,512.87
St. Helens	342	2,384.38	3,083.02
Sefton	343	2,383.16	3,056.14
Wirral	344	2,453.78	3,183.43
Bolton	350	2,375.29	3,049.63
Bury	351	2,299.92	2,941.04
Manchester	352	2,798.88	3,692.76
Oldham	353	2,441.32	3,137.62
Rochdale	354	2,478.25	3,204.15
Salford	355	2,487.97	3,243.57
Stockport	356	2,247.44	2,914.21
Tameside	357	2,364.57	3,031.35
Trafford	358	2,309.74	2,979.34
Wigan	359	2,283.05	2,930.06
Barnsley	370	2,381.20	3,083.51
Doncaster	371	2,449.46	3,181.49
Rotherham	372	2,363.80	3,022.26
Sheffield	373	2,412.81	3,110.61
Bradford	380	2,518.19	3,273.33
Calderdale	381	2,380.76	3,072.17
Kirklees	382	2,404.27	3,098.84
Leeds	383	2,382.51	3,065.82
Wakefield	384	2,313.72	2,981.93
Gateshead	390	2,418.61	3,123.56
Newcastle upon Tyne	391	2,545.98	3,296.14
North Tyneside	392	2,346.08	3,046.79
South Tyneside	393	2,468.46	3,178.43
Sunderland	394	2,423.06	3,127.49
Isles of Scilly	420	4,268.16	5,588.41
Bath and North East Somerset	800	2,237.76	2,830.33
City of Bristol	801	2,438.78	3,168.47
North Somerset	802	2,253.79	2,916.44
South Gloucestershire	803	2,189.83	2,838.87
Hartlepool	805	2,445.25	3,153.22

2000–01 primary and secondary provisional SSA allocations per pupil

LEA name	LEA number	Primary SSA/5–10 pupil (£)	Secondary SSA/11–15 pupil (£)
Middlesbrough	806	2,568.63	3,360.77
Redcar and Cleveland	807	2,436.87	3,116.40
Stockton-on-Tees	808	2,391.07	3,095.30
City of Kingston-upon-Hull	810	2,534.03	3,263.39
East Riding of Yorkshire	811	2,278.68	2,933.71
North East Lincolnshire	812	2,429.19	3,134.60
North Lincolnshire	813	2,374.96	3,072.54
North Yorkshire	815	2,332.17	2,983.04
York	816	2,262.83	2,938.87
Bedfordshire	820	2,389.87	3,081.04
Luton	821	2,606.76	3,363.19
Buckinghamshire	825	2,390.21	3,092.56
Milton Keynes	826	2,462.04	3,192.11
Derbyshire	830	2,265.63	2,923.19
Derby	831	2,431.71	3,135.50
Dorset	835	2,282.26	2,926.26
Poole	836	2,235.16	2,872.87
Bournemouth	837	2,360.82	3,014.47
Durham	840	2,390.16	3,094.58
Darlington	841	2,379.09	3,078.18
East Sussex	845	2,444.89	3,166.37
Brighton and Hove	846	2,527.97	3,256.01
Hampshire	850	2,327.14	3,014.00
Portsmouth	851	2,506.65	3,209.25
Southampton	852	2,533.79	3,296.09
Leicestershire	855	2,202.08	2,848.21
Leicester	856	2,577.11	3,327.17
Rutland	857	2,264.47	2,799.19
Staffordshire	860	2,237.17	2,884.30
Stoke on Trent	861	2,397.24	3,095.97
Wiltshire	865	2,291.77	2,970.79
Swindon	866	2,290.07	2,956.54
Bracknell Forest	867	2,432.81	3,158.95
Windsor and Maidenhead	868	2,452.15	3,107.49
Newbury	869	2,319.84	2,959.88
Reading	870	2,500.98	3,270.94
Slough	871	2,849.13	3,763.31
Wokingham	872	2,218.69	2,873.54
Cambridgeshire	873	2,313.16	2,964.17
Peterborough	874	2,463.46	3,168.50
Cheshire	875	2,257.08	2,897.44
Halton	876	2,479.99	3,224.14
Warrington	877	2,235.92	2,889.59
Devon	878	2,345.12	3,037.54
Plymouth	879	2,385.66	3,043.17
Torbay	880	2,385.18	3,076.82
Essex	881	2,441.36	3,146.74
Southend	882	2,488.91	3,200.76
Thurrock	883	2,596.84	3,349.37
Herefordshire	884	2,366.24	3,061.93
Worcestershire	885	2,255.62	2,901.99
Kent	886	2,442.75	3,149.02
Rochester and Gillingham	887	2,416.98	3,116.82
Lancashire	888	2,360.82	3,042.83
Blackburn	889	2,547.76	3,276.75
Blackpool	890	2,403.52	3,131.41
Nottinghamshire	891	2,291.31	2,961.81
Nottingham City	892	2,625.75	3,414.64
Shropshire	893	2,303.98	2,960.26
The Wrekin	894	2,389.15	3,086.39
Cornwall	908	2,368.90	3,058.30
Cumbria	909	2,356.72	3,031.45
Gloucestershire	916	2,282.43	2,935.36
Hertfordshire	919	2,474.15	3,170.11
Isle of Wight Council	921	2,519.63	3,257.30
Lincolnshire	925	2,359.37	3,040.70
Norfolk	926	2,377.79	3,051.85
Northamptonshire	928	2,308.12	2,974.27
Northumberland	929	2,332.45	3,013.54
Oxfordshire	931	2,397.36	3,070.14

2000–01 primary and secondary provisional SSA allocations per pupil

LEA name	LEA number	Primary SSA/5–10 pupil (£)	Secondary SSA/11–15 pupil (£)
Somerset	933	2,309.98	2,983.76
Suffolk	935	2,313.49	2,960.30
Surrey	936	2,436.23	3,127.14
Warwickshire	967	2,266.53	2,918.23
West Sussex	938	2,366.36	3,044.42

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will give the standard spending assessment per pupil for the primary and secondary sectors for *(a)* Cambridgeshire and *(b)* Suffolk for each year from 1990–91 to 2000–01, adjusted for inflation at current values. [102695]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Real Terms Unit SSA allocations for Cambridgeshire and Suffolk 1990–91 to 2000–01

£ *(at 2000–01 prices)*

	Pri SSA/5–10 pupil	Sec SSA/11–15 pupil	Pri+Sec SSA/5–15 pupil
1990–91			
Cambridgeshire	1,954.42	2,774.14	2,314.81
Suffolk	1,910.11	2,710.26	2,272.59
1991–92			
Cambridgeshire	2,098.58	3,040.17	2,502.31
Suffolk	2,054.90	2,975.91	2,461.93
1992–93			
Cambridgeshire	2,155.01	3,146.41	2,578.31
Suffolk	2,108.67	3,077.71	2,535.46
1993–94			
Cambridgeshire	2,144.65	3,109.21	2,561.34
Suffolk	2,096.12	3,037.78	2,513.93
1994–95			
Cambridgeshire	2,167.15	3,026.24	2,540.39
Suffolk	2,119.43	2,958.47	2,493.77
1995–96			
Cambridgeshire	2,138.83	2,859.33	2,454.82
Suffolk	2,075.07	2,761.11	2,382.07
1996–97			
Cambridgeshire	2,167.13	2,887.84	2,482.38
Suffolk	2,099.41	2,803.70	2,408.63
1997–98			
Cambridgeshire	2,169.87	2,847.94	2,464.36
Suffolk	2,130.92	2,792.89	2,419.33
1998–99			
Cambridgeshire	2,205.17	2,865.74	2,483.11
Suffolk	2,201.35	2,854.85	2,485.03
1999–2000			
Cambridgeshire	2,279.99	2,914.78	2,547.59
Suffolk	2,277.26	2,904.32	2,549.45
2000–01 (provisional)			
Cambridgeshire	2,313.16	2,964.17	2,590.76
Suffolk	2,313.49	2,960.30	2,599.56

Cambridgeshire Local Education Authority

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the revenue resources allocated to Cambridgeshire local education authority for 1999–2000 and the percentage increase this represents over the previous year in *(a)* real terms and *(b)* cash terms. [102696]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the table.

SSA and standards fund only

	Cash	1999–2000 prices
1998–1999 (£ million)	186.733	190.935
1999–2000 (£ million)	199.463	199.463
Percentage increase	6.8	4.5

Grammar Schools (Barnet)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in relation to a petition needed to trigger a ballot on the future of grammar schools in Barnet, *(a)* what is the total number of signatures required for a petition, *(b)* what methods exist (i) for the parents seeking change, to validate the total required and (ii) for independent validation of the total required and *(c)* who has provided the data on which the number of signatures required is based. [102757]

Ms Estelle Morris: The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the Education (Grammar School Ballots) Regulations 1998 define the number of signatures required to trigger a ballot on the future of selective admissions to grammar schools (the petition threshold) as 20 per cent. of the total number of eligible parents. The Secretary of State has appointed an independent ballot administration company, Electoral Reform (Ballot Services) Ltd. (ERBS), to receive and check petitions and run any ballots. The ERBS has calculated that in Barnet the petition threshold is 7,209. The legislation does not require the ERBS to submit the number of eligible parents to scrutiny by (i) parents or (ii) any other body.

In order to calculate the petition threshold, the ERBS required the three grammar schools in Barnet to provide details of all schools from which pupils came in the last three years. Those schools where a total of five or more children had transferred, over the last three years, to a grammar school in Barnet qualified as feeder schools and had to provide the ERBS with lists of eligible parents. From this information, the ERBS calculated the total number of parents entitled to sign a petition or vote in a ballot, and subsequently the petition threshold.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, in relation to petitions needed to trigger ballots on the future of grammar schools in Barnet, *(a)* the names of the schools in respect of which parents are eligible to be balloted and *(b)* the number of parents eligible to be balloted in each of these schools; and how many children transferred to each of the Barnet grammar schools from each of the primary schools in each of the last three years. [102755]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table. The number of parents eligible to ballot entered at column two, is that provided

by the schools themselves and includes some duplication where parents have more than one child attending feeder schools. After entering all the names onto a single computer database, Electoral Reform (Ballot Services) Ltd have carried out checks and have removed those names entered more than once. The total number of eligible parents from the 'cleared' database was 36,045 which resulted in a petition threshold of 7,209.

		Number of pupils transferred to each grammar school in each of the past three years								
	Number of parents eligible to	*Henrietta Barnett*			*St. Michael's Catholic School*			*Queen Elizabeth*		
Name of school	*ballot*	1997	1998	1999	1997	1998	1999	1997	1998	1999
Alpha Preparatory School	327	—	—	—	—	—	—	5	1	—
Aylward School	628	1	1	1	—	—	—	2	—	—
Belmont School	589	—	—	1	—	—	—	3	1	2
Broadfields School	382	2	1	—	—	—	—	6	1	2
Brookfields	493	—	2	2	—	—	—	1	—	—
Brookland Junior School	556	3	5	1	—	—	—	—	3	2
Buckingham College	177	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	2	1
Channing Junior School	727	3	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Christ Church C E School	256	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	1	3
Coleridge Infant and Junior School	669	4	2	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Colindale Primary School	540	3	—	2	—	—	—	1	1	2
Courtland	299	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	3
Cromer Road School	296	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	—	1
Deansbrook Junior School	465	1	—	2	—	—	—	—	5	1
Dollis School	693	—	2	2	—	—	—	1	2	3
Drizen	109	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	2
Elmgrove Middle	390	—	1	—	—	—	1	1	1	2
Eversley School	642	—	2	1	—	—	—	6	2	3
Fairway Junior School	267	3	1	—	—	—	—	3	2	1
Foulds	441	—	1	1	1	—	—	—	1	1
Frith Manor School	851	1	—	4	1	—	—	2	—	1
Garden Suburb Junior School	558	3	2	7	—	—	1	4	7	7
Gower School	201	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	2	2
Grange Park	960	—	—	1	—	—	—	3	—	2
Grimsdyke School	573	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2	5
Hadley Wood School	282	2	—	1	—	—	—	3	2	4
Hartsbourne JMI School	306	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	—	2
Holland House School	235	1	4	—	—	—	—	1	1	1
Kerem	316	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	2
Lochniver House School	516	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	3	3
Manor Lodge School	513	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	1	1
Michael Sobell Sinai School	985	1	1	3	—	—	—	—	2	2
Monken Hadley School	165	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	—	1
Moss Hall Junior School	535	2	2	1	1	—	—	3	3	5
Mount Stewart School	580	1	2	—	—	—	—	2	—	4
Northbridge House	1,325	1	1	2	—	—	—	—	—	1
Oliver Goldsmith	655	—	—	1	—	—	—	2	—	2
Osidge Junior School	568	—	—	—	—	1	—	3	2	4
Our Lady of Grace Junior School	365	—	—	—	1	2	3	—	—	—
Our Lady of Lourdes School N12	275	—	—	1	6	3	2	—	—	1
Our Lady of Lourdes School N11	274	—	—	—	1	3	3	—	—	—
Our Lady of Muswell School	375	—	—	—	5	3	8	—	—	—
Queenswell Junior School	477	2	1	1	—	—	—	1	4	1
Radlett Prepatory School	732	3	1	1	—	—	—	13	7	7
Roe Green	311	—	—	2	1	—	—	1	—	1
Rokesly School	415	1	1	—	—	—	—	1	1	2
Rosh Pinah School	638	2	—	—	—	—	—	2	2	—
Sacred Heart School	523	2	1	—	4	13	11	—	2	1
Salcombe Preparatory School	815	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	1	1
St. Agnes	408	—	—	—	2	2	1	—	—	—
St. Andrew C E School	307	—	1	1	—	—	—	4	3	2
St. Bernadette School	592	—	—	—	7	3	3	—	—	—
St. Catherine R C School	392	—	—	—	1	—	2	1	3	1
St. George's School	530	—	—	—	7	2	7	—	—	—
St. James	295	1	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	2
St. John Vianney	334	—	—	—	1	1	3	—	—	—
St. Johns' School	262	2	—	—	—	—	—	1	3	—
St. Joseph RC Junior School NW4	395	—	—	—	5	2	2	—	—	—
St. Joseph School W9	354	1	—	—	1	5	3	—	—	—
St. Martha's Convent School	243	—	—	—	6	3	4	—	—	—
St. Martin De Pores School	343	—	—	—	2	2	2	—	—	2
St. Mary Magdalen School	510	—	—	—	1	5	—	—	—	—
St. Mary's N3	622	3	—	3	—	1	—	3	5	1
St. Mary's Preparatory School NW4	348	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	2	2

Name of school	Number of parents eligible to ballot	Number of pupils transferred to each grammar school in each of the past three years: Henrietta Barnett 1997	Henrietta Barnett 1998	Henrietta Barnett 1999	St. Michael's Catholic School 1997	St. Michael's Catholic School 1998	St. Michael's Catholic School 1999	Queen Elizabeth 1997	Queen Elizabeth 1998	Queen Elizabeth 1999
St. Mary's Primary School NW3	422	—	2	1	3	2	1	—	—	—
St. Michael's CE Primary School	657	—	2	2	—	—	—	1	2	2
St. Monica's School	609	—	—	—	10	13	2	3	—	1
St. Nicholas' School	103	1	1	—	—	—	—	3	—	—
St. Paul's C E School Mill Hill	280	—	—	1	—	—	—	7	3	4
St. Paul's School N21	591	1	—	2	—	—	—	1	1	1
St. Robert Southwell	492	—	—	—	1	1	2	—	1	—
St. Theresa's RC School	296	1	1	1	5	4	5	—	—	—
St. Vincent's RC School	90	—	—	—	9	6	6	1	1	—
Stanburn School	558	—	—	—	—	—	—	5	6	2
Underhill Junior School	523	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	5	1
Walker School	595	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	4	2
Wolfson Hillel School	553	1	1	3	—	—	—	1	—	3
Woodridge School	288	1	1	—	—	1	—	1	1	—

Group Foundation Bodies

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to ensure that local education authorities do not promote policies of encouraging schools to form group foundation bodies. [102827]

Ms Estelle Morris: The group foundation mechanism enables schools without existing foundations to enter the Voluntary sector. It is for governing bodies themselves to decide whether they should apply to establish or join a foundation body for their schools. If they do so, the foundation body will hold the schools' land for the purposes of the schools, appoint foundation governors for those schools and promote co-operation between member schools. Local education authorities have no major role in any decision by governing bodies considering membership of a foundation body.

School Organisation Committees

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy to prevent party political appointments, other than local education authority nominations, to school organisation committees. [102821]

Ms Estelle Morris: The local authority has no control over membership of three of the groups on the committee, and is prevented by regulation from appointing governors who are elected members to the schools group. Since decisions on plans or proposals can be reached only if all groups vote unanimously, party politics should not be a determining factor in local decision-making. Where the groups cannot agree, the case is referred to the Schools Adjudicator for decision.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to allow for appeals against the composition of school organisation committees. [102820]

Ms Estelle Morris: School organisation committees must be set up in accordance with The Education (School Organisation Committees) (England) Regulations 1999. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would consider any complaints or other evidence that a local education authority had failed to comply with the regulations, or exercised its functions unreasonably.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure that school organisation committees are representative of local community interests. [102819]

Ms Estelle Morris: The composition of school organisation committees is set out in The Education (School Organisation Committees) (England) Regulations 1999. Committees comprise the main partners in the provision of education locally: the local education authority, Church of England and Roman Catholic diocesan interests, post-16 interests and schools. The regulations allow for a sixth group representing local community interests to be set up, but this is at the discretion of the local education authority and not a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish the political affiliation of members of school organisation committees. [102822]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not collect systematic information about membership of school organisation committees.

Teacher Training

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 421W, on teachers, if the grants are payable to *(a)* the school of each training graduate or *(b)* the company contracted to provide the service. [102844]

Ms Estelle Morris: Training grants are paid to recommending bodies who are responsible for organising individual training programmes for trainees. The recommending body can be the school where the trainee is employed or another organisation capable of organising a training programme. The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) employs two contractors to administer the employment-based routes to Qualified Teacher Status including approval of training programmes, administration of funding and assessment arrangements and matching potential trainees with jobs. Neither of these organisations acts as a recommending body.

Specialist Schools

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the categories of specialist comprehensives, *(b)* the number of schools in each category and *(c)* the number and percentage of successful and unsuccessful applications for specialist school status. [102865]

Ms Estelle Morris: The numbers of specialist schools designated as arts, languages, sports or technology colleges which are deemed comprehensive schools are listed in the table.

Category of specialism	*Comprehensive*	*Other* [1]
Arts Colleges	29	0
Language Colleges	65	6
Sports Colleges	35	2
Technology Colleges	241	25

[1] The 33 other schools comprise 18 selective, 12 secondary modern and three special schools

For competitions held in 1998 and 1999 the number and percentage of successful and unsuccessful applications for specialist designation are set out in the table.

	Number	*Percentage*
Successful		
March 1998	51	42
October 1998	35	53
March 1999	37	71
June 1999	41	45
Unsuccessful		
March 1998	71	58
October 1998	31	47
March 1999	15	29
June 1999	51	55

Home Education

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children are claimed to be being educated at home, or elsewhere outside school, on the basis of their parent signing a form presented to them by an education official; and if he will make a statement. [102970]

Jacqui Smith: Data on the number of children educated otherwise than at school are not collected centrally. Under the Education Act 1996, parents can opt to educate their children otherwise than at school. In such circumstances, pupils can only be removed from a school roll where the school has received written notification from the parent that the pupil is receiving education otherwise than at school. Local Education Authorities have a duty to ensure that the education provided is suitable to the age, aptitude and ability and any special educational needs the child may have. It is Local Education Authorities to decide how to monitor these arrangements.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he proposes to take to ensure that claims that children are receiving home education are not used to disguise truancy; and if he will make a statement. [102971]

Jacqui Smith: Local Education Authorities have a duty to monitor the quality of home education being provided and we expect them to carry out this duty. If home education is not being provided or is not of a satisfactory standard, Local Education Authorities can apply to the courts of an Educational Supervision Order. Alternatively they should pursue a School Attendance Order.

Where we receive specific complaints that schools may be using home education as a method to disguise truancy, we will investigate.

Special Educational Needs Audit

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which local authorities currently include a special educational needs factor in their local management of schools formula on the basis of an SEN audit. [102977]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given on 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 587W.

Departmental Employees (Early Retirement)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many employees of his Department availed themselves of early retirement packages and at what total cost in financial year 1996–97. [102976]

Mr. Wills: During the 1996–97 financial year 660 employees of the Department for Education and Employment (including the Employment Service) took early retirement at a total cost in the year of £11.8 million.

Education Standards (North-East)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the quality of education in *(a)* Middlesbrough, *(b)* Redcar and Cleveland, *(c)* Stockton and *(d)* Hartlepool local education authorities in (i) primary and (ii) secondary schools since 1 May 1997, following the recent school inspections there. [102912]

Ms Estelle Morris: It is the responsibility of Ofsted to inspect education in schools. The data are based on Ofsted's school inspections since the start of the current round in September 1997. The figures are expressed as a percentage of schools inspected.

LEA	*Primary*	*Secondary*
Middlesbrough	65 per cent. good or very good	33 per cent. good or very good
26 primary inspections	8 per cent. serious weaknesses	17 per cent. serious weaknesses
6 secondary inspections	4 per cent. requiring special measures	0 per cent. requiring special measures
Stockton	76 per cent. good or very good	67 per cent. good or very good
34 primary inspections	0 per cent. serious weaknesses	0 per cent. serious weaknesses
3 secondary inspections	3 per cent. requiring special measures	0 per cent. requiring special measures

LEA	*Primary*	*Secondary*
Redcar and Cleveland	55 per cent. good or very good	33 per cent. good or very good
27 primary inspections	7 per cent. serious weaknesses	17 per cent. serious weaknesses
6 secondary inspections	0 per cent. requiring special measures	0 per cent. requiring special measures
Hartlepool	81 per cent. good or very good	100 per cent. good or very good
21 primary inspections	5 per cent. serious weaknesses	0 per cent. serious weaknesses
1 secondary inspection	0 per cent. requiring special measures	0 per cent. requiring special measures

Exclusions

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the local education authorities in England which have issued guidance to their schools on strategies for improving attendance and preventing exclusions. [102883]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* This information is not collected centrally. However, local education authorities' Behaviour Support Plans are expected to include information on the support for schools in improving the management of pupil behaviour with a view, among other things, to minimising unauthorised absence and exclusions.

In addition local education authorities should take account of Circular 10/99 "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" which is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's guidance on pupil attendance, behaviour, exclusion and re-integration. This is backed up with some £500 million, which we are making available over three years, for projects to help schools tackle truancy and prevent exclusions.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the local education authorities in the North West Region which analyse attendance and exclusion data at *(a)* group, *(b)* pupil and *(c)* school level. [102888]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The Department does not collect information about how local education authorities analyse their attendance and exclusions data.

All schools since 1991, other than independent schools for boarders only, have been required to collect information on authorised and unauthorised absences. Absence figures at local education authority level have been published annually in the National Tables since 1992–93. The latest published information relates to the academic year 1998–99.

Figures on permanent exclusions were collected for the first time in January 1996. They have been published annually since 1994–95. The latest published information, produced in the volume "Statistics of Education (Schools in England) 1999", relates to the academic year 1997–98.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many local education authorities collect and analyse data on fixed period exclusions; and what percentage of local education authorities this represents. [102886]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The Department does not collect information about the number of local education authorities which analyse their data on fixed period exclusions.

For the first time, the Department has recently required all local education authorities to provide data on fixed period exclusions of more than five school days in total in any one term in the academic year 1998–99.

Truancy

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent research his Department has commissioned to investigate the underlying causes of truancy; and if he will make a statement. [102887]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* We are aware that truancy is a complex problem with no one single cause or solution. Last year, the Government published "Truancy and School Exclusion" which set out major research findings on the causes and activities needed to address the issue. This publication drew upon research commissioned by the Department including "Truancy in English Secondary Schools" by D. J. O'Keefe and the Audit Commission Report "Misspent Youth; Young People and Crime". In July 1999 we issued new guidance to schools on attendance. On 1 November, we launched "Tackling Truancy Together" which set out our strategy in further detail including evidence of what works in increasing attendance.

Fresh Start Schools

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what monitoring is undertaken of Fresh Start schools' policies and actions in dealing with children playing truant. [102982]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* During all school inspections, inspectors are required to examine schools' policies on attendance and will check that attendance registers are completed accurately. Fresh Start schools are subject to the normal requirements of the school inspection system.

Local Learning Partnerships

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to support local learning partnerships where they cross the boundaries of local learning and skills councils. [102985]

Mr. Wicks: With the exception of London—where all learning partnerships are re-assessing their boundaries—there are only two instances of learning partnerships crossing the boundaries of local learning and skills councils. In both cases, Government Office staff are working closely with local partners to ensure a smooth transition. In addition, support funding is available both to Government Offices and learning partnerships to facilitate the process of change.

Learning partnerships have a key role in the new post-16 arrangements; they are very well placed to provide the in-depth understanding of local needs that will be needed to inform the work of local learning and skills councils. In general, learning partnerships are being advised to ensure that they have a sufficiently local focus to enable them to identify local needs and co-ordinate effective local action.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102328]

Mr. Wills: There is a designated room for Muslim prayers in Caxton House, London. There is also a designated room for nursing mothers in Moorfoot, Sheffield. In addition, first aid rooms and rest rooms at other headquarters sites can be used for a variety of purposes as staff needs dictate.

The number of smoking rooms at each of the main HQ locations is as follows:

London: 8

Sheffield: 7

Runcorn: 5

Darlington: 2.

The Employment Service maintains 1,000 smoking rooms in their 1,253 properties.

Education Act 1996

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment with reference to section 486, what the procedure is for applying for grants under the Education Act 1996, Part VIII; and if guidelines are available. [103570]

Mr. Wills: This section of the Education Act 1996 allows for the making of regulations to provide grant to bodies other than Local Education Authorities whose object, or main object is, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, to promote learning or research. Grants are paid to a variety of organisations for different specific purposes. There is no single set procedure for applying for such grants.

Student Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many British citizens who have been educated in other European Union countries are currently unable to access student loans on the ground of recent non-residence in the United Kingdom. [102924]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Post-16 Education

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost of administration in providing education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds by *(a)* schools, *(b)* further education colleges, *(c)* sixth form colleges and *(d)* TECs. [103577]

Mr. Wicks: The administration costs of each of these sectors are made public through the Revenue Outturn Statement from Local Education Authorities and annual reports/accounts produced by the Further Education Funding Council for England and TECs. However, the information requested on the administration costs of education and training provision for 16 to 19-year-olds is not identified separately.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost of administration of the provision of education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds under his proposals by *(a)* schools, *(b)* further education colleges, *(c)* sixth form colleges, *(d)* the National Learning and Skills Council, *(e)* local learning and skills councils, *(f)* local life-long learning partnerships and *(g)* sixth form colleges maintained by the Learning and Skills Council. [103576]

Mr. Wicks: We have not made separate estimates of the costs of providing education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds by sector. However, the new arrangements for learning and skills will cut through the present duplication and bureaucracy and will secure savings of at least £50 million a year across post-16 learning, which will be invested in improving the quality of learning.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the significant differences between the updated Transition Plan for Post-16 Education and Training published on 26 November and the draft published on 30 June; and what is the reason for these differences. [102926]

Mr. Wicks: The joint DfEE/DTI National Transition Plan, first issued alongside the White Paper, is a working document that is intended to evolve and develop as discussions with partner organisations take place. The Plan has been updated to take account of partners views and to set out in more detail the steps needed to set up the Learning and Skills Council, subject to Parliamentary approval.

There is a new section which lists the progress made since the launch of the White Paper; an overarching plan which summaries the key milestones; and a new annex which details the groups which have been set up to support arrangements.

We intend to produce further regular updates over the next year.

Examination Bodies (Standards)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to ensure that examining bodies maintain consistent and mutually coherent standards. [102922]

Mr. Wicks: The Education Act 1997 confers powers on the ACCAC and QCA to keep under review all aspects of external vocational and academic qualifications. This year, Ministers endorsed detailed arrangements, developed by the ACCAC, CCEA and QCA, for the regulation of external qualifications. These arrangements set out the criteria which these bodies are applying to accredit qualifications to a national framework and will use to monitor the performance and practices of examining bodies in the delivery of these qualifications.

Curriculum 2000

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to ensure that Curriculum 2000 qualifications are of equal rigour and reflect equal attainment to their predecessors. [102921]

Mr. Wicks: All the AS/A level and GNVQ specifications to be introduced for teaching from September 2000 will have to meet the demanding criteria set out by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. These are designed to ensure that the rigour of the qualifications is at least fully maintained. In approving these criteria, Ministers took steps to strengthen the rigour of the new A levels by requiring all candidates to take a demanding synoptic test at the end of the course covering the who syllabus, and by allowing only one opportunity to re-take individual modules. Ministers have also taken steps to upgrade the GNVQ assessment regime.

Accommodation Transfers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to transfer buildings *(a)* from the Further Education Funding Council to the Learning and Skills Council and *(b)* from TECs to local Learning and Skills Councils; and what will be the net cost of transfers, sales and reprovision. [102923]

Mr. Wicks: It is our intention that the Learning and Skills Council should take over the lease on the Further Education and Funding Council's main premises in Coventry. Government Offices are currently undertaking an exercise, in consultation with TECs, to identify suitable premises for the local Learning and Skills Councils. Our priority will be to work closely with TECs to make the most cost effective use of existing premises wherever possible, either for the LSC, for a franchisee of the Small Business Service or for other local activities. It is too early at this stage to estimate the net costs of transfers, sales and reprovision.

Medical Techniques

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many medical schools offer training in complementary and alternative medical techniques; what percentage this constitutes of the total number of medical schools; and if he will make a statement. [103477]

Mr. Wicks: This information is not collected centrally.

Student Drop-out Rates

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students left each United Kingdom university before completing their course in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998. [103131]

Mr. Wicks: Information published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in "Higher Education Performance Indicators" gives for the first time projected non-completion rates for students beginning full-time degree courses in 1996–97 for each of the HE institutions in the UK. A copy is available in the Library. This information will be published annually.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC (Macpherson Report)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on his discussions with the Royal Ulster Constabulary Chief Constable in respect of recommendations 20, 21 and 22 of the Macpherson Inquiry report regarding procedures, record keeping and policy directive adherence at scenes of crime. [101858]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* Following the publication of the Macpherson Report, discussions took place on a tripartite basis between representatives of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Police Authority for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Office to consider the implications of the Report in the wider context of policing in Northern Ireland.

In relation to recommendation 20, the RUC is acutely aware of the importance of effective co-ordination of police resources and activity at major incidents. Consequently all existing Force orders, manuals of guidance and policy are being distilled into generic procedures which will ensure clear roles and lines of responsibility.

On recommendation 21, the experience gained by the RUC in three decades of investigating major crime has resulted in tried and tested procedures. There are current RUC Force instructions concerning records made by individual officers and specialist units in relation to their functions and strict rules require the retention of all such records as long as an investigation remains open.

As for recommendation 22, the RUC in line with GB constabularies is to obtain an updated version of HOLMES (Home Office Large Major Enquiry System) and the resourcing requirements are addressed in the draft ACPO Major Incident Room Standardised Agreed Procedures (MIRSAP). These guidelines, which should be confirmed early in the new year, will define the resources necessary to operate HOLMES investigations. A Detective Inspector is dedicated to the overall supervision of all HOLMES units deployed throughout the RUC, which includes checking on the adequacy of resources and that difficulties are reported.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102370]

Mr. Mandelson: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussions.

H-blocks

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the H-blocks in the Maze Prison which are still in use; which group of convicted terrorist prisoners are in occupation of each block; and if he will list the H-blocks in use and which groups occupied each on 1 December 1998. [102161]

Mr. Ingram: At the present time, five of the eight Blocks are in use. Loyalist prisoners occupy three Blocks and Republican prisoners occupy the remaining two.

This was the position on 1 December 1998 also.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he expects the next H-block in the Maze Prison to be cleared of prisoners; and which one it will be. [102159]

Mr. Ingram: I an unable to forecast when the next H-block within Maze Prison will close.

Prisoner releases between now and July 2000, when Maze is expected to close, are relatively small. The situation will be kept under review.

Prisoners (Rehabilitation)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the organisations dealing with rehabilitation of terrorist prisoners which receive funds from the public purse; which department funds them; and what sums went to each such organisation in each of the last five years and the current year to date. [102158]

Mr. Ingram: Rehabilitation services are provided by the Prison Service to all prisoners in Northern Ireland mainly through educational and vocational training courses and services. In addition, welfare and rehabilitation services are provided by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

Overall costs for the last five financial years are:

£

	Prison Service Education and VT costs	*Prison Service payments to Probation Board for NI*
1994–95	239,000	822,100
1995–96	258,600	822,100
1996–97	191,600	822,100
1997–98	216,500	810,000
1998–99	230,600	810,000
1999–2000[1]	90,500	360,000

[1] To date

Other bodies such as the Training and Employment Agency and the Local Enterprise Development Unit have provided services on occasions at no additional charge.

During the current financial year, in accordance with commitments in the Good Friday Agreement, a number of individual payments have been made for the delivery of courses for the rehabilitation of prisoners released from HMP Maze at an overall total of £16,215.

Ex-prisoner groups also receive funding from the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Since the beginning of this Programme, £4.3 million (of which the Government fund 25 per cent.) in respect of Measures 4.4 and 4.6 has been allocated to ex-prisoner groups. Groups may also have received EU funding from District Partnerships and other funders.

Welfare Organisations (Prison Visits)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will set out the criteria for payments to the representatives of welfare organisations making visits to prisons in Northern Ireland for meetings with terrorist prisoners. [102308]

Mr. Ingram: There are no such criteria, because no payments are made to representatives of welfare organisations making visits to prisons in Northern Ireland for meetings with prisoners.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102731]

Mr. Mandelson: The Northern Ireland Office is composed of staff from the Home Civil Service (HCS) and the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). Of the HCS group based in London, 20 per cent. are of ethnic minority origin. Information about the ethnic origin of staff within Northern Ireland is not yet available. Race Relations legislation was recently introduced to Northern Ireland and the NIO has surveyed all staff on their ethnic origin. The data are presently being analysed.

My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office set out in his reply of 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 264W, corporate action that we are taking to encourage the employment of people from ethnic minorities. Staff are recruited to the NIO HCS group by way of a recruitment agency and figures indicate that candidates from ethnic minorities are joining the Department.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102078]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Since May 1997 the money spent by the Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies on external consultants and advisers was £2,358,138.99.

Electoral Costs

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his estimate of the cost of registering an elector on the electoral register in Northern Ireland; and what is the cost of entering a name to correct an omission from the register. [102547]

Mr. George Howarth: The cost of registering an elector on the 1999 Northern Ireland electoral register was approximately 44p. In addition, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland spent £12,465 on press adverts encouraging voters to check the draft register and displaying both the draft and final versions of the register at sub-post offices throughout Northern Ireland.

Correcting the register to amend a clerical error would incur a nominal cost of approximately 20p. It is not possible to estimate the cost of including a name on the register as a result of a successful claim considered at

revision hearing and at which a Deputy Electoral Officer presides. The administrative cost of such hearing varies depending on the location and the number of claims heard.

Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the number of *(a)* non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* task forces in Northern Ireland (i) on 1 May 1997, (ii) on 1 May 1998 and (iii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [102488]

Mr. Ingram: Since 1 May 1997 to 1 November 1999 the number of non-departmental public bodies for Northern Ireland has been nine. A nil return for task forces.

RUC Station Closures

Mr. Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has for the closure of the *(a)* Greencastle and *(b)* York Road RUC stations. [102485]

Mr. Ingram: The allocation and use of all resources is entirely a matter for the professional judgment and operational discretion of the Chief Constable.

The RUC and the Police Authority for Northern Ireland have advised that there are no plans for the closure of *(a)* Greencastle and *(b)* York Road RUC Stations.

RUC Insignia

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what rules and guidelines govern the use of RUC insignia; and what penalties apply to the use of insignia without permission. [101879]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* It is a matter for the discretion of the Chief Constable as to whether he may seek the assistance of the courts to prevent or stop the unauthorised or alleged misuse of the insignia.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make it his policy to refuse permission for use of the RUC insignia in association with political campaigns. [102082]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The use of the insignia of the Royal Ulster Constabulary is a matter for the Chief Constable.

Police (Auditors)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who is the appointed auditor for the *(a)* Northern Ireland Police Federation, *(b)* the Police Association for Northern Ireland and *(c)* Northern Ireland Police Authority; and what recommendations have been made by each of those auditors concerning the guidelines for expenditure on political campaigning. [101876]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The auditors to the Police Federation for Northern Ireland are George Hay & Co. The Police Association for NI receives no funds and has no accounts. The National Audit Office audits the accounts of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland. Neither George Hay & Co. nor the Comptroller and Auditor General made any recommendations concerning guidelines for expenditure on political campaigning by either organisation.

RUC (Yugoslavia)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland *(a)* when, *(b)* how many and *(c)* for what periods RUC officers will be deployed in the former Yugoslavia; under whose discipline they will operate; and in which areas they will be deployed. [101880]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* In accordance with the provisions of Section 8 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, the RUC have seven officers serving with the United Nations International Police Task Force in Bosnia, four since March 1999 and three from October 1999, where they are monitoring the performance of the Bosnian police service. At the end of November, 60 RUC officers took up positions with the United Nations Mission in Kosovo where they are undertaking an executive policing role pending a new Kosovan police service being trained and ready to take over law enforcement there. All of the secondments are for a period of 12 months and the officers are under the command of the United Nations Police Commissioner.

RUC (US Training)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations he has received from the US Congress concerning US-sponsored training and exchange programmes with the RUC. [101875]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* I have received no representations from the US congress concerning US-sponsored training and exchange programmes with the RUC.

Illegal Parades

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reasons the RUC were unable to identify persons involved in illegal parades in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [101874]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* Police actions in relation to such parades are constrained by the need to minimise disruption to the wider community. In many instances such parades are short-lived affairs where police intervention to arrest participants would exacerbate the situation.

The primary aim of police is therefore to monitor such parades in order to prevent serious disorder. The secondary aim is to gather sufficient evidence to allow the identification/prosecution of participants. If sufficient notice of the parade is obtained, technical resources can be deployed to gather video and still photographic images. These efforts can however be frustrated by a number of factors such as:

(1) Many illegal parades take place at night

(2) Clarity of images can be affected by distance and weather conditions.

(3) Participants are often strangers to the area.

(4) Band uniforms are not always worn.

Furthermore, in order to be able to substantiate a prosecution, police must be in a position to prove that individuals knew the parade to be illegal. Often such parades can be over before the police can respond and for operational reasons police may be deployed at some distance from the parade.

Union Flags

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what days the Union flag was flown at RUC Garnerville in the last year; what body is responsible for policy on flags and emblems at this establishment; and on what date policy on the flying of flags was last reviewed. [101758]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The Union Flag has been flown at RUC Garnerville on the following occasions over the past year:

6 February 1999—Her Majesty's Accession

8 February 1999—Death of King Hussein of Jordan

19 February 1999—Birthday of HRH the Prince of York

8 March 1999—Commonwealth Day

10 March 1999—Birthday of HRH the Earl of Wessex

21 April 1999—Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen

2 June 1999—Coronation Day

10 June 1999—Birthday of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh

12 June 1999—Official Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen

4 August 1999—Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother

15 August 1999—Birthday of HRH the Princess Royal

21 August 1999—Birthday of HRH the Princess Margaret

14 November 1999—Birthday of HRH the Prince of Wales/ Remembrance Day

20 November 1999—Anniversary of Her Majesty's Wedding.

The Chief Constable is responsible for determining Force policy on flags and emblems at this and all other RUC establishments. The policy was last reviewed in September 1998.

Police Federation

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what *(a)* funds and *(b)* benefits in kind have been provided from public funds to the Police Federation for Northern Ireland in the past two years; what rules govern the Federation and its staff; how many staff are employed by the Federation, at what cost; what payments have been made by the Federation to assist the *Daily Telegraph* Defend the RUC campaign; and what payments were made by the Federation to cover the expenses of staffing phonelines associated with the campaign. [101759]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* No contributions are made to the Police Federation for Northern Ireland from public funds. The body, which currently employs six staff, is governed by Federation Rules drawn up in accordance with the provision of the Police Association for NI Regulations 1991.

I am advised the Federation has not made any payments to the *Daily Telegraph* or Defend the RUC campaigns.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the estimated cost of *(a)* installing and operating for one quarter the additional telephone lines and 0845 number and *(b)* printing by the Police Federation in connection with its campaign against the Patten Commission. [101762]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* I am advised that the estimated total cost of the 0845-telephone number, which has now been discontinued, was £1,947. There were no additional telephone lines installed. I am also advised that the printing costs in connection with Patten Commission issues cannot be readily disaggregated from overall Federation printing costs.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many advertisements entitled, "Where Patten Got it Wrong", have been placed in which newspapers by the Police Federation; and what the cost of each was. [101760]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* I am advised that the Police Federation for Northern Ireland placed advertisements in the Belfast Telegraph, The Irish News and The Belfast Newsletter at a total cost of £1,688.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many times since 1 September the Police Federation of Northern Ireland has met; and what decisions have been made concerning the allocation of funds for a public campaign against the findings of the Patten Commission. [101761]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The Central Committee of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland meet under the rules for three days bi-monthly although this may be split with the approval of the Chief Constable. I am advised that one additional meeting was held to approve the response to Government on the findings of the Patten Commission and a special one day meeting of all representatives was held with the approval of the Chief Constable on 24 September. The use of funds for a public campaign was approved by the Central Committee and at the direction of the special meeting of representatives.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much money has been received in donations by the Police Federation since 1 September; and what arrangements have been made for financial oversight of the allocation of these funds. [101763]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* I am advised that no donations have been received by the Police Federation for Northern Ireland since 1 September 1999.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what body has responsibility for overseeing the financial arrangements entered into by the Police Federation; and what powers he has to prevent the Federation from making ultra vires payments. [101764]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The financial arrangements of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland are governed by the provisions of Regulations 18 to 22, inclusive, of the Police Association for NI Regulations 1991.

RUC Reform

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent representations HM Government have received from *(a)* political parties in Northern Ireland, *(b)* other Governments and *(c)* other interested parties concerning the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary; and if he will make a statement. [102623]

Mr. Ingram: *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* Since 9 September the Government has held 14 meetings with Northern Ireland political parties to discuss police reform. Nearly all of the political parties have also provided written submissions. Meetings have also been held with the Irish Government and there have been 32 meetings with other interested parties. In addition a large number of written submissions and calls to the freephone number have been received.

Formal consultation about the proposals in the Patten Report has now ended. The Government is considering all the comments and representations it has received, before coming to decisions about the way forward.

Northern Ireland Police Authority

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the executive or non-executive members of the Northern Ireland Police Authority for any part of the years *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [103565]

Mr. Ingram: The names of all executive members of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland from 1997–99 could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The following list provides the names of non-executive members of the Police Authority who have served for any part of the years 1997, 1998 and 1999:

Mr. P.J. Armstrong (Chairman)
Professor H. Wallace (Vice-Chairman)
Lt. Col. R.H. Bicker (from July 1997)
Mr. H.B. Casey (from July 1997)
Ms S. Chamberlain (to June 1997)
Rev. R.J. Coulter (from July 1997)
Mr. R.L. Cree (from July 1997)
Ms S. Cherry (to June 1997)
Mr. S. Davidson (to June 1997)
Sir R. Empey
Mrs. K.F. Hargan
Mr. A.R.A. Huston (from July 1997)
Mr. B.R. Johnston (to June 1997)
Mr. T. Kerrigan (to June 1997)
Mr. S.J. McCammick (to June 1997)
Mrs. R.A.McCormick (to June 1997)
Mr. J.O. McDonald
Mr. W.R. Martin (to June 1997)
Mr. J.L. Neeson (to June 1997)
Mrs. N.P. O'Loan (to October 1999)
Mrs. R.I. Peters-Gallagher
Mrs. E.A. Rea
Mrs. F. Reid (from July 1997)
Mrs. G.A. Rice (from July 1997)
Mr. F.A. Rocks
Professor R.A.J. Spence
Mr. T. Wilson.

In addition, the names of two Authority members have been omitted to maintain their wish of anonymity for security reasons.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which executive or non-executive member of the Northern Ireland Police Authority has taken responsibility for the testing or evaluation of vehicles for police use in the last three years. [103569]

Mr. Ingram: Executive members of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland have taken responsibility for the testing or evaluation of vehicles for police use in the last three years.

No non-executive members of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland have taken the responsibility for the testing or evaluation of vehicles for police use in the last three years.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102334]

Mr. Mandelson: There is nothing in the Civil Service Code that specifies that any accommodation is to be set aside for religious use, pregnant and nursing mothers or smokers.

The Secretary of State has staff located in 24 buildings. Eleven of the buildings have a room set aside for smokers. None have rooms specifically set aside for ethnic minority religious use or by pregnant or nursing mothers. However, in many cases staff have access to rest rooms or interview rooms which they can use.

Carrickfergus Police Station

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he plans to take as a result of receiving reports of the likely cause of the fire at Carrickfergus police station on 10 January 1990. [102083]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

The Ministry of Defence has not received any report on the likely cause of the fire at Carrickfergus police station, which would in any case be a matter for my right hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Secretary. With regard to the recent allegation in *The Sunday Times*, the MOD is not aware of any evidence to support it. The Secretary of State for Defence has written to the editor, recommending that any evidence of criminal activity be made available to the police.

CABINET OFFICE

Outsourcing

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what steps she has taken to ensure that proposed changes to the TUPE Regulations are taken into account in ongoing outsourcing negotiations; and if she will make a statement; [103715]

(2) what guidance her Department has issued to cover previously outsourced staff when contracts with private sector suppliers are *(a)* renewed, *(b)* renegotiated and *(c)* put out to tender on their expiry; [103717]

(3) what guidance her Department has issued on the inclusion in outsourcing contracts of penalties for failure to abide by the TUPE Regulations; what plans she has to vary these penalties following her assessment of performance by private-sector companies subject to the TUPE Regulations; and if she will make a statement. [103628]

Mr. Stringer: The Cabinet Office published on 5 July 1999, for public consultation, a "Statement of Practice for Staff Transfers in the Public Sector", *Official Report*, column 388W. The Statement of Practice sets out the Government's policy for the application of TUPE where the public sector is the employer or client in a contracting-out or subsequent retendering situation. These should be conducted on the presumption that the protections of TUPE will apply, unless there are genuinely exceptional reasons not to do so. This includes second and subsequent round contracts that result in a new contractor and should ensure that all staff involved are treated fairly and consistently and their rights protected. Employees or employee representatives who consider that their rights under the Regulations have been infringed may seek legal redress. The response to the public consultation on the Statement of Practice was extremely positive with strong support from public and private sector employers and employee representatives. I aim to publish a final version of the Statement early in the New Year.

The Department of Trade and Industry are currently conducting a review of the TUPE Regulations and will shortly be consulting on proposals for revising them. Changes to the regulations will be reflected in guidance to public sector employers.

Copies of "Staff Transfers in the Public Sector: Statement of Practice" are in the Library of the House.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what arrangements *(a)* she and *(b)* Ministers in her Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside her Department. [102372]

Mr. Stringer: The format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Anti-drugs Strategy

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much support has been made available for *(a)* action against illegal drugs and *(b)* education in schools regarding illegal drugs as a result of the seizure of the assets of convicted drug offenders; and how much she expects to be made available in each of the next three years. [102767]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Confiscated Assets Fund will total £3 million for 1999–2000, increasing to £5 million in 2000–01.

The UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator is currently identifying initiatives which might receive funding from the Confiscated Assets Fund to support action against illegal drugs. I hope to be able to make announcements shortly.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much of the funding for the anti-drugs strategy made available under the Comprehensive Spending Review is to be spent each year on *(a)* drugs education in primary and secondary schools and *(b)* other forms of drugs education for children and young persons under 16 years of age. [102793]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review some £7.5 million per annum is being made available through the Department for Education and Employment to assist all schools, including pupil referral units and the youth service, to deliver effective education about drugs in line with the aims relating to young people identified in the Government's anti drug strategy.

Other education and prevention activities are funded by the Department of Health who will be spending £6 million per year to support a range of drugs education and prevention activities, and by the Drugs Prevention Advisory Service providing £6 million per year to encourage and support good practice in drugs prevention at a local, regional and national level.

Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102100]

Mr. Stringer: My Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies expenditure on external advisers and consultants since May 1997 is £930,744.

Special Advisers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what factors account for the increase in costs of special advisers over the period from 1995–96 to 1998–99. [101452]

Mr. Stringer: I can only answer for the period since May 1997. We always made it clear that, if elected, we would have a strengthening of the centre to ensure a firm political focus and greater co-ordination to the work of this Administration. This is what we have done, and this accounts for some of the increase. The costs also include the Standards and Effectiveness Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the three members of the Council of Economic Advisers and the appointments of the UK anti-drugs co-ordinator and his deputy. These appointments are new to this Administration and are not covered by paybill figures for the years before May 1997.

HEALTH

Meningitis C Vaccine

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made on the distribution of meningitis C vaccination to the primary health care sector; whether enough vaccine is available; and if he will make a statement. [101188]

Yvette Cooper: Distribution of the new meningococcal C conjugate vaccine to the primary care sector commenced during the week beginning 22 November 1999 to allow immunisations to start on Monday 29 November 1999. Weekly distribution continues thereafter. Enough vaccine has been made available through this route to immunise babies in the first phase of the programme, that is, those presenting at 2, 3, and 4 months of age for their primary immunisation of Hib/DTP and those presenting for their first measles, mumps and rubella immunisation at around 13 months of age. The allocation of vaccine will automatically be increased to provide for other age ranges as the programme rolls out.

Organs Retention

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the terms of reference are for the Chief Medical Officer's investigation into retention of organs; when he expects the Chief Medical Officer to report; and if he will ask the Chief Medical Officer to consult the Bristol Heart Children Action Group during his investigation. [101453]

Mr. Denham: The terms of reference of the Chief Medical Officer's investigation are: to look at the extent of organ and tissue retention following post-mortem examinations within the NHS as a whole; how NHS staff manage the process in the interests of the public health, and what bereaved family/partners and the public should expect.

The investigation will take full account of the work of the Bristol inquiry, including the views of the public and patient representatives, and the findings from the Alder Hey investigations. The CMO will make his report available to the Secretary of State for Health at the end of September.

Physiotherapists

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evaluation his Department has made of the role physiotherapists play in cutting waiting lists and reducing patients' stay in hospital. [102556]

Mr. Denham: We have not made a formal evaluation. However, physiotherapists play an increasingly important role in preventing admissions to hospital and enabling people who no longer need to be in hospital to return home.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many physiotherapists left the NHS in each of the last five years. [102557]

Mr. Denham: The available information is given in the table. Information on the numbers of physiotherapists joining and leaving the National Health Service is not collected centrally, but the annual non-medical workforce census gives total numbers of physiotherapists at 30 September each year.

NHS hospital and community health services—Physiotherapists in England at 30 September each year

Year	*Headcount*
1994	13,260
1995	13,400
1996	13,740
1997	14,030
1998	14,490

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten.
2. Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.
3. Figures exclude learners.
4. Due to a change in classification in 1995 for collecting the data, from payscale to occupational code, 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 figures are non-comparable with earlier years.

Source:
Department of Health non-medical workforce census.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS physiotherapy posts are vacant in each health region in England. [102558]

Mr. Denham: The available information is given in the table.

Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey. Vacancies in NHS Trusts by Region; physiotherapists as at 31 March 1999

whole time equivalents

	Physiotherapists	
	Total vacancies [1]	*3-month vacancies* [2]
England total	990	420
Northern and Yorkshire	100	30
Trent	80	40
West Midlands	130	70
North West	130	60
Eastern	110	50
London	200	100
South East	150	50
South West	80	20

[1] Posts that Trusts were actively trying to fill at 31 March 1999
[2] Posts that had been vacant for three months or more at 31 March 1999
[3] Figures are rounded to the nearest 10

Source:
Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey 1999

Diabetes

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much his Department spent on the treatment of diabetes and diabetic complications in each of the last three years, expressed *(a)* in absolute terms and *(b)* as a proportion of the total NHS budget; [102575]

(2) if he will publish statistics relating to the comparative performance of diabetic clinics throughout the UK. [102576]

Mr. Denham: We do not collect data in a way that enables us to distinguish the amount spent on the treatment of diabetes and diabetic complications. Owing to the complications, acute and chronic, which may arise

from diabetes, it would be a very complex task to derive the precise expenditure for diabetes. Nor do we currently collect information that would enable us to compare the performance of diabetic clinics.

As part of our programme to build a fairer and more modern National Health Service, we have launched national service frameworks to drive up quality, and reduce unacceptable variations in key service areas. My noble Friend the Lord Hunt of Kings Heath announced last week the commencement of work on a national service framework for diabetes. We would expect that the issues relating to the costs, and to the cost-effectiveness, of care provision for diabetes and its complications will become clearer as part of this work.

We shall publish the diabetes national service framework in 2001. It will set national standards, define service models and put in place strategies to support implementation, delivery and monitoring of performance.

Prescription Pricing Authority

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the Prescription Pricing Authority will resume paying actual prices of drugs to pharmacies; [102641]

(2) what is the Prescription Pricing Authority's current backlog of unprocessed prescriptions. [102706]

Ms Stuart: The Prescription Pricing Authority (PPA) is due to finish processing September dispensed prescriptions by 5 January 2000. At that point the backlog will consist of October and November dispensing—around 88 million prescriptions.

Pharmacies are being reimbursed the appropriate amount by the PPA, but to a later timetable than normal. In the interim, pharmacies are paid an estimated amount each month at the time they would normally have been paid.

The PPA has increased overtime working, recruited additional staff and re-engineered computer systems to speed up the data entry process. All these actions are helping to alleviate the problem, but more needs to be done. We are currently looking at a range of options to enable the PPA to return to its normal timescales of processing prescriptions and to deal with the backlog of prescriptions.

GPs (Bolton, South-East)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioners have *(a)* practised, *(b)* retired and *(c)* been appointed in the Bolton, South-East constituency in each of the last three years; and how many of them worked in single doctor practices. [102763]

Mr. Denham: The published data relate to the number of unrestricted principals and equivalents in Wigan and Bolton Health Authority. However, they do not separately identify the constituency of Bolton, South-East.

The information relating to Wigan and Bolton is as follows:

	1996	*1997*	*1998*
Unrestricted Principals and Equivalents (UPES)	287	290	290
UPEs in single handed practices	60	59	57
Newly appointed UPEs	13	11	8
Newly appointed UPEs in single handed practices	3	0	0

Notes:

1. There are no figures available for the number of UPEs retiring.
2. UPEs includes restricted principals, PMS Contracted GPs and PMS salaried GPs.
3. Figures relate to UPEs in post at 1 October each year. Newly appointed UPEs are those appointed since 1 October of the previous year to the list of the health authority.

Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 53W, on Mid Essex Hospital Services Trust, for what reason he was unable to specify the exact number of patients who had waited more than 18 months for treatment in the Middlesex Hospital Trust area on 9 December. [103117]

Mr. Denham: The last published figures for waiting times are those for October 1999. These show that, at the end of October 1999, no patients waited over 18 months for treatment at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Services Trust.

The next published figures will be those for November 1999, due to be published in the week commencing 10 January 2000. Until these figures are published, no centrally collected and validated figures are available.

Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to publish the third report to Parliament on the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme. [103540]

Ms Stuart: The Third Report to Parliament on the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme (PPRS) was published today. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

The PPRS: Third Report to Parliament covers both the operation of the 1993 PPRS until it ended in September 1999, and the introduction of the new scheme from October 1999. It provides an insight into the running of the PPRS; reports on considerations taken into account by the Government in formulating the 1999 PPRS; and describes the principal features of the new scheme, including the benefits expected to arise from it for the National Health Service and the British pharmaceutical industry.

Physiotherapists and Physical Therapists

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning protection of the job titles of physiotherapist and physical therapist; and if he will make a statement. [103230]

Mr. Denham: Since 21 September 1999, my right hon. Friend the Secretary for State has received 50 representations about the protection of the job titles of physiotherapist and physical therapist.

We have accepted the recommendations of an independent review of The Professions Supplementary to Medicine Legislation, including that common titles should be protected. The titles to be protected will be the subject of consultation.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a substantive reply to his letter of 4 November. [103088]

Ms Stuart: My right hon. Friend will reply as soon as possible.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire's letters of 23 August regarding Mrs. G. Hague, and 29 September regarding Mr. P. Hodgson. [102798]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* I replied to the hon. Member's letter of 23 August regarding his constituent, Mrs. Hague, on 14 December. I replied to the hon. Member's letter of 29 September regarding his constituent Mr. P Hodson on 16 December.

CE Marking

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that local government social services departments establish traceability systems for medical devices registered for CE marking. [R] [103094]

Mr. Hutton: All medical devices when first placed on the market have to be CE marked by the manufacturer or supplier to demonstrate they are safe to use and conform with the requirements of the Medical Devices Regulations. These Regulations are enforced by the Medical Devices Agency (MDA). The MDA distributed the good practice guide "Medical Device and Equipment Management for Hospital and Community-based Organisations" to the National Health Service and social services in January 1998. This included guidance on record-keeping for good equipment management, including the tracing of products. This guidance was referred to in the later publication "Good Practice in Disability Equipment Services", which was commissioned by the Department from the Disabled Living Centres Council and distributed to the NHS and to social services in October 1998.

Nurses

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses employed in the NHS have their salary paid for by *(a)* a commercial organisation and *(b)* sponsorship. [R] [103091]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Patient Policing

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to allow doctors and hospitals to withdraw life-sustaining food and water from patients; and if he will make a statement. [103599]

Ms Stuart: Food and fluids should always be offered to patients who are capable of swallowing them. Where nutrition and hydration have to be provided by artificial means, their possible withdrawal is in all cases a matter of clinical judgment which is undertaken in accordance with professional advice provided by a responsible and recognised body of medical opinion and the general law.

Consultant Vacancies

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultant vacancies currently exist in accident and emergency departments. [102084]

Ms Stuart: The latest available information about consultant vacancies in accident and emergency is contained in the Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey, March 1999, copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many accident and emergency departments currently have no consultant in post. [102085]

Ms Stuart: Information about the number of staff in individual hospital departments is not collected centrally. The latest available data show that, of those National Health Service trusts with a major accident and emergency department (consultant-led service with full resuscitation facilities) on 31 March 1998, every one had at least one consultant in post on 30 September 1998.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the number of UK CCST holders who are available to fill consultant vacancies in accident and emergency departments. [102086]

Ms Stuart: For England and Wales, information about the current numbers of higher specialist trainees holding Certificates of Completion of Specialist Training (CCST) is not collected centrally. Information from the Regional Postgraduate Deans suggests that around 20 higher specialist trainees in accident and emergency medicine should have gained their CCST in 1999. We anticipate that around 40 should qualify in 2000 and there will be around 320 qualifying for consultant posts in accident and emergency medicine between now and 2004.

Questions relating to Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the First Secretary for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

E112 Forms

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what directions are given to health authorities and trusts regarding the issue of form E112 for continuing medical and surgical treatment in the EU paid for by the NHS. [103210]

Ms Stuart: Advice to health authorities and trusts was issued in 1994. Decisions on issue of forms E112 are taken centrally by the Department, taking into account the view of the relevant health authority and the individual patient's medical and social circumstances. Information for the general public is contained in the Department's leaflet "Health Advice for Travellers", copies of which are available in the Library.

Relenza

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if Age Concern was consulted by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence during the appraisal of relenza. [101677]

Ms Stuart: I understand that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence consulted Age Concern informally during its rapid appraisal of Relenza. For a full appraisal, including the review of Relenza next year, interested parties such as professional and patient groups will be invited to submit evidence and to comment on guidance in draft.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for West Chelmsford will receive a reply to his two questions on deficits at Mid Essex Hospital Trust and North Essex Health Authority, which were due for an answer on 24 November. [102868]

Mr. Denham: I shall let the hon. Member have a reply to his two questions as soon as possible.

Life Expectancy (Babies)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the life expectancy of new baby *(a)* boys and *(b)* girls, broken down by health authority area of England. [102229]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 20 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on life expectancy of new baby boys and girls.

The information requested is shown in the tables.

Life expectancy at birth (in years) by Health Authority, England 1995–97

	Females	*Males*
Avon	81.1	75.7
Barking and Havering	79 .6	74.3
Barnet	80.4	76.7
Barnsley	78.3	73.4
Bedfordshire	80.0	75.0
Berkshire	80.3	75.9
Bexley and Greenwich	79.6	74.7
Birmingham	78.8	73.2
Bradford	78.8	73.4
Brent and Harrow	80.5	75.1
Bromley	81.4	76.4
Buckinghamshire	80.4	76.3
Bury and Rochdale	78.0	73.0
Calderdale and Kirklees	79.0	73.9
Cambridgeshire	80.5	76.0
Camden and Islington	80.1	73.0
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	80.4	75.3
County Durham	78.5	73.2
Coventry	78.9	73.1
Croydon	79.9	75.2
Doncaster	78.4	73.4
Dorset	81.4	76.0

Life expectancy at birth (in years) by Health Authority, England 1995–97

	Females	*Males*
Dudley	79.6	74.6
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	79.7	74.0
East and North Hertfordshire	80.6	76.3
East Kent	80.2	74.9
East Lancashire	78.0	72.8
East London and The City	78.5	71.9
East Riding	79.4	74.3
East Surrey	81.2	76.7
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	80.8	75.0
Enfield and Haringey	80.1	74.6
Gateshead and South Tyneside	78.4	72.9
Gloucestershire	80.5	75.7
Herefordshire	80.7	75.7
Hillingdon	80.2	75.6
Isle of Wight	80.7	75.1
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	81.7	75.0
Kingston and Richmond	81.5	76.3
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	78.7	72.2
Leeds	79.7	74.4
Leicestershire	80.1	75.5
Lincolnshire	80.0	74.9
Liverpool	77.0	71.2
Manchester	76.9	70.1
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	80.1	74.7
Morecambe Bay	79.9	74.6
Newcastle and North Tyneside	78.5	73.3
Norfolk	80.9	76.2
North and East Devon	81.2	76.3
North and Mid Hampshire	80.7	76.1
North Cheshire	78.1	73.0
North Cumbria	79.0	74.3
North Derbyshire	79.4	74.4
North Essex	80.7	76.0
North Nottinghamshire	79.3	74.3
North Staffordshire	79.1	73.4
North West Lancashire	78.8	73.2
North Yorkshire	80.6	75.8
Northamptonshire	79.9	74.8
Northumberland	78.8	73.9
Nottingham	79.9	74.6
Oxfordshire	81.1	76.8
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	79.7	75.2
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	80.2	75.1
Rotherham	78.7	74.0
Salford and Trafford	78.5	73.2
Sandwell	78.5	72.5
Sefton	79.2	73.9
Sheffield	79.3	74.2
Shropshire	80.4	75.1
Solihull	80.8	76.4
Somerset	81.0	76.1
South and West Devon	80.7	75.4
South Cheshire	80.2	75.1
South Essex	80.1	75.3
South Humber	79.8	73.7
South Lancashire	79.4	74.6
South Staffordshire	79.9	75.0
Southampton and South West Hampshire	80.7	75.6
Southern Derbyshire	79.7	74.8
St. Helens and Knowsley	77.8	72.4
Stockport	80.3	75.2
Suffolk	80.8	76.0
Sunderland	78.2	73.0
Tees	78.5	72.9
Wakefield	78.6	73.5
Walsall	79.4	73.6
Warwickshire	79.8	75.1
West Hertfordshire	80.9	76.6
West Kent	80.0	75.3
West Pennine	78.2	72.3
West Surrey	81.1	76.7
West Sussex	81.1	76.2

Life expectancy at birth (in years) by Health Authority, England 1995–97

	Females	*Males*
Wigan and Bolton	78.4	73.6
Wiltshire	80.4	75.9
Wirral	79.1	73.3
Wolverhampton	78.6	73.2
Worcestershire	80.0	75.5

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of the total workforce in her Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps she is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in her Department. [102732]

Clare Short: 7.8 per cent. of DFID's Civil Service staff are of ethnic minority origin.

Our recruitment adverts state that we are committed to a policy of equal opportunities and encourage applicants from all sectors of the community. Vacancies are advertised by various means, including national newspapers, professional journals, several south-east London newspapers with a broad readership base, and local job centres. For posts and grades where there is a particular lack of representation from certain sectors of the community, our advertisements now carry a specific invitation, encouraging under-represented groups to apply. Selection is on merit.

We took part in a recruitment fair in London in the summer of 1999 specifically aimed at ethnic minority graduates and we plan to do so again in 2000.

Hurricane Mitch

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department has taken to provide assistance for women in Nicaragua since Hurricane Mitch. [102818]

Clare Short: Our post-hurricane emergency assistance to Nicaragua was in the health, education and water sectors. It is our policy to ensure all emergency assistance takes account of the needs of women and does not leave them marginalised.

Women's NGOs in Nicaragua form a strong voice within civil society and we have supported their roles through our capacity building fund with the Inter American Development Bank and also in post Mitch reconstruction activities and decision making through the Joint Funding Scheme. The funds have gone to supporting a number of projects with non-governmental organisations, including Christian Aid and Oxfam, that are aimed specifically at women particularly in the fields of health and training.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what debts *(a)* Honduras and *(b)* Nicaragua have paid to the (i) World Bank and (ii) IMF (A) before and (B) since Hurricane Mitch. [102816]

Clare Short: The levels of debt service payments (principal and others) by Honduras and Nicaragua to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are shown in the tables.

Year	*World Bank [1] in US$ millions*	*International monetary fund in SDR [2] millions*
Honduras		
1996	94.1	27.31
1997	77.8	7.05
1998	73.5	1.51
1999	63.7	5.08
Nicaragua		
1996	25.9	6.68
1997	23.4	0.1
1998	14.9	0.29
1999	10.9	2.3

[1] The World Bank figures include International Board for Reconstruction and International Development Association.
[2] SDR—Special Drawing Rights
Note:
The figures are based on calendar years

In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, the UK proposed a Central American Trust Fund in order to help Honduras and Nicaragua cover their debt service payments to the International Financial Institutions. In the period December 1998 to November 1999, Honduras received US$ 71.8 million and Nicaragua received US$ 41.3 million. The UK contributed US$ 16.3 million to the Central American Emergency Trust Fund.

Burundi

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what response has been made by the Government of Burundi to the request by the United Nations Security Council that it should stop its policy of forced regroupment into recruitment camps. [101522]

Clare Short *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* Following an open debate on Burundi in the UN Security Council on 12 November, a Presidential statement was issued calling on the Government of Burundi to "halt the policy of forced regroupment and allow the affected people to return to their homes, with full and unhindered humanitarian access throughout the process".

In response to this and other international pressure, on 13 November the Government of Burundi made a statement to the international community on the "organisation of protective settlements for rural populations". The statement justified the policy of regroupment as necessary for security reasons. There is no specific commitment to reversing the policy although the Government of Burundi claims that

> "the settlements are gradually dispersed at the first signs of a return to a satisfactory state of security".

More recently, in a statement to the press on 3 December, UN Security Council members repeated their concern at the policy of forced regroupment.

I am placing a copy of the Government of Burundi statement in the House of Commons Library.

Kosovo (Economic Costs)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of

the economic cost of the Kosovo war to *(a)* Bulgaria and *(b)* Romania; and how much development assistance is planned for those countries from her budget for 1999–2000 and 2000–01. [102642]

Clare Short: We have not made estimates. The IMF has estimated the output in the six most affected countries of the region, including Bulgaria and Romania, has been reduced by 2 per cent. in 1999, and that budget and current account deficits have been significantly increased. The international community has pledged a total of $1,372 million to bridge Bulgaria and Romania's estimated funding gaps in 1999.

We have budgeted a total of £8 million for Bulgaria and £12 million for Romania, in bilateral assistance, over 1999–2000 and 2000–01. We also provide our share of multilateral aid to both countries through the EU and the International Financial Institutions.

Nicaragua/Honduras (Reconstruction)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what mechanisms are in place to monitor funds pledged for reconstruction in *(a)* Nicaragua and *(b)* Honduras. [102817]

Clare Short: The Consultative Group meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America in Stockholm agreed that a group of five major donor countries, (Germany, Canada, the United States, Sweden and Spain), would be set up to monitor the process of reconstruction and transformation in Central America.

The five countries met for the first time in September and drew up a proposal for a permanent dialogue with the governments of Honduras, Nicaragua, (and El Salvador and Guatemala).

Their remit is to negotiate and agree with the affected countries a system of follow up and support. The affected countries will provide progress reports on their reconstruction programmes.

The aim of the group is to reduce the social and ecological vulnerability of the region; improve transparency; consolidate democracy and good governance; promote respect for human rights; coordinate donor efforts; and intensify efforts to reduce the external debt burden.

Representatives from each of the five major donor countries and each of the four affected Central American countries will meet on a frequent basis to ensure that all conditions are adhered to. They will be reporting back to the next Consultative Group meetings to be held in Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua in the week beginning 7 February 2000. Britain will be represented at these meetings.

Kashmir

Mr. Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid has been provided to *(a)* Indian-controlled Kashmir and *(b)* Azad Kashmir since May 1997. [102978]

Clare Short: Since May 1997, we have provided £650,000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross for their humanitarian assistance programme in Jammu and Kashmir and £132,500 to the Save the Children Fund to support their work there. In addition, about £19,000 has been provided under the Small Grants Scheme to help equip a maternity hospital in Anantnag.

Azad Kashmir has received no direct Department for International Development (DFID) assistance during the period in question, but it has benefited from our support for Pakistan's Social Action Programme. Prior to the military coup in Pakistan, we were in preliminary discussions with the Azad Kashmiri and Pakistani authorities about possible direct support for elementary education in the area. Those discussions were suspended when our bilateral assistance to the Pakistan Government was frozen on 15 October. We are also willing to consider assistance for victims in Azad Kashmir of the conflict in the region, if a suitable channel for our funds could be identified.

Tariff-free Products

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her oral answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 811, which products will be excluded when the EU offers tariff-free access for essentially all products to the least developed countries. [102995]

Clare Short: The EU has not yet decided which products will be excluded from its offer of duty free access for essentially all exports from developing countries. The UK has called for duty free access for all imports for the least developed. We will be pressing for minimum exceptions to the EU scheme.

Ministerial Visit (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what meetings she held with members and officials of the United States Government during her visits to the United States on 4–6 October 1998 and 10–11 December 1998; who was present from the US Government at each meeting; and what was the date and location of each meeting. [103048]

Clare Short: The purpose of my visit to Washington was to attend the annual meeting of the IMF and World Bank on 2 October 1998. I attended a G8 Development Ministers' meeting at the World Bank Headquarters, at which Brian Atwood, then USAID Administrator was present.

The purpose of my visit to New York on 10–11 November was to deliver a speech on the future of the United Nations to an audience of permanent representatives and others concerned with the work of the UN. I did not hold any meetings with officials of the United States Government.

Humanitarian Relief

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what guidance her Department gives to British companies wishing to donate their products or services to assist in the provision of humanitarian relief organised by charities. [103594]

Clare Short: We advise such companies to get in touch with the Disasters Emergency Committee, a joint body of 15 of the leading British Non-Governmental Organisation concerned with humanitarian relief.

Sub-equatorial Africa

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much British bilateral aid was given to the Governments in sub-equatorial Africa over the past five years; how much of that money is not accounted for; and if she will make a statement. [103198]

Clare Short: Total UK expenditure to sub-equatorial Africa[1] over the last five years is shown in the table:

	£ million
1994–95	351
1995–96	293
1996–97	321
1997–98	335
1998–99	393

[1] This covers the following countries—Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, Kenya, Uganda and Comoros.

Over this period, a total of £7,000 could not be properly accounted for.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much was paid to the British Council for managing DFID contracts in sub-equatorial Africa over the past five years; and if she will make a statement. [103197]

Clare Short: The value of contracts awarded to the British Council, in sub Saharan Africa, since 1 April 1996 (the earliest date for which reliable figures are available), is £64,027,377. These contracts cover a variety of services including management. Disaggregated figures for contracts limited to management functions could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many people are employed to monitor British bilateral aid given to Governments in sub-equatorial Africa over the past five years; and if she will make a statement. [103196]

Clare Short: During the past five years, the Department for International Development employed the following numbers of UK based administrative staff in our regional offices in Harare, Pretoria and Nairobi.

1995: 30

1996: 34

1997: 34

1998: 36

1999: 45.

These staff are engaged on a wide range of administrative activities, ranging from policy formulation to the oversight of programme and project management, including expenditure monitoring.

Pakistan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received on women's rights in Pakistan; and if she will make a statement. [103213]

Clare Short: I have received no representations since my reply to the hon. Member's almost identical question on 10 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 555W. We regularly receive such representations and take every opportunity to ensure that the Pakistani authorities are aware of concerns. We take account of gender equality issues as a matter of course in our bilateral development assistance, which has focused upon reducing poverty and increasing basic rights and access to essential services—especially for women and girls.

TREASURY

Population Flows

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the annual population *(a)* inflow to and *(b)* outflow from the Government Office, North East Region; and what was migration between the Government Office North East Region and (i) other parts of the UK and (ii) other countries in each year from 1992 to 1998. [102810]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 20 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question about the estimated in and outflows from and to the North East region.

The attached table presents the information you require. The estimates of internal population movements are based on the movement of NHS doctors' patients between the former Family Health Services Authority Areas. They should not be regarded as a perfect measure of migration as there is variation in the delay between a person moving and registering with a new doctor. Additionally, some moves may not result in a re-registration: for example, individuals may migrate again before registering with a doctor. Conversely, there may be others who move and re-register several times a year.

Moves between the individual Government Office Regions (GORs) of England and the rest of the United Kingdom are now published in *Key Population and Vital Statistics*, which is available in the House of Commons Library. Prior to 1997, the analysis related to moves within England and Wales only.

The estimates of international (external) migration are derived from the International Passenger Survey (IPS), a sample survey of passengers arriving at and departing from the main air, sea and Channel Tunnel routes. Estimates derived from the IPS are subject to both sampling and non-sampling error. Some types of migrants are not covered by the IPS as it does not cover routes between the UK and the Irish Republic, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. All movements of diplomats and armed forces personnel are also excluded, as are asylum seekers and visitor switchers—persons admitted as short-term visitors who are subsequently granted a stay for a year or longer. These estimates can be found in the publication *International Migration*, which is available in the House of Commons Library.

The following table shows total inflow and outflow (in thousands) to and from the North East Government Office Region: to and from the rest of the UK, and to and from outside the UK.

Migration to and from the North East Government Office Region, 1992–98

(Thousand)

Year	Total Inflow to the North East	Of which Internal from the rest of the UK	Of which External from other countries	Total Outflow from the North East	Of which Internal to the rest of the UK	Of which External to other countries
1992	46.6	40.3	6.3	45.4	40.1	5.3
1993	42.6	38.3	4.3	45.7	41.7	4.0
1994	42.7	37.1	5.6	48.2	43.5	4.7
1995	40.3	37.9	2.4	48.1	45.6	2.5
1996	41.7	38.6	3.1	48.7	44.5	4.2
1997	50.8	38.6	12.2	55.9	44.5	11.4
1998	48.0	41.5	6.5	49.2	45.5	3.7

Ghana

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what conditions connected with *(a)* Government and *(b)* economic development were placed on the Government of Ghana by (i) the IMF and (ii) the World Bank in the last five years. [101976]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The conditions connected with Government and economic development which have been agreed between the Government of Ghana and the IMF and World Bank in the last five years are intended to promote policies that reduce poverty, promote structural reform, macroeconomic stability and support balanced growth. Conditions refer to agreed objectives to;

improve fiscal policies

enhance the effectiveness of monetary policy and accelerate financial sector reform

improve external debt management and trade policy

continue public sector reform

improve private sector development and economic competitiveness.

Other major objectives and conditions relate to the Government of Ghana's policies and commitments to implement agreed sector and cross sectoral reforms (e.g. in agriculture, environment, water, transportation, electricity, petroleum sector), to improve the quality and coverage of social services (education, health) and to reduce poverty.

Welsh Language

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what, at the latest available date, was the proportion of people who said that they could speak Welsh in each of the counties of Wales. [102968]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Denzil Davies, dated 20 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the proportion of people who said they could speak Welsh in Wales.

The percentage of persons aged three and over speaking Welsh, extracted from the 1991 Census County Reports, for each of the former counties of Wales are:

Counties	Percentage
Clwyd	18.2
Dyfed	43.7
Gwent	2.4
Gwynned	61.0
Mid Glamorgan (Morgannwg Ganol)	8.5
Powys	20.2
South Glamorgan (De Morgannwg)	6.5
West Glamorgan (Gorllewin Morgannwg)	15.0

Copies of the 1991 Census County Reports are held in the House of Commons Library

Paris Club

Mr. Hopkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer under what terms of agreement the Paris Club of creditor countries operates; and if he will place a copy of such terms in the Library. [103397]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Paris Club has no formal terms of agreement. It is an informal and voluntary gathering of creditors who have agreed to treat in a coordinated way the debt due to them.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 11 October on behalf of his constituent Mr. Gent. [103083]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have done so.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 26 October on behalf of Mr. Bastow. [103078]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have done so.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 28 September on behalf of his constituent Mr. Walkinshaw. [103079]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have done so.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the names and designations of those who

attended the meeting chaired by him on 9 December, involving representatives of Her Majesty's Government and the devolved administrations, to discuss combating poverty in the UK; and if he will publish the minutes of this and future such meetings. [103053]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Under paragraph A.11 of the agreement on the Joint Ministerial Committee (Cm 444), which has been agreed between the UK Government, the Scottish Executive and the Cabinet of the National Assembly of Wales, the proceedings of meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee are regarded as confidential by participants, in order to permit free and candid discussion. As such minutes of JMC meetings will not be published.

Red Diesel

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his Department's policy is in respect of passenger service vehicle operators who, having legally filled their vehicles with red diesel in Norway, have traces of red dye discovered in their fuel tanks by HM Customs and Excise in the United Kingdom. [103015]

Mr. Timms: The presence of any fiscal marker as listed in The Hydrocarbon Oil (Designated Markers) Regulations 1996 in the fuel tank of a road vehicle in the UK constitutes an offence under section 24A of the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to exempt horticulture from the climate change levy. [102988]

Mr. Timms: The Government believe that all sectors of the economy must play their part in helping tackle the problem of climate change. So there will not be complete exemptions from the climate change levy for particular firms or sectors. However, like other sectors, firms in the horticulture sector will be able to take advantage of the proposed exemptions from the levy for electricity generated from 'new' forms of renewable energy and in 'good quality' combined heat and power plants, and the enhanced capital allowances for firms making energy saving investments. All sectors will also benefit from the lower overall rates for the levy announced by the Chancellor in his Pre-Budget Report.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of *(a)* the projected receipts from the climate change levy and *(b)* the projected level of national insurance refunds in each of the Government standard regions; and if he will make a statement. [102861]

Mr. Timms: The climate change levy is designed to be revenue neutral for the private sector as a whole, with all the revenues raised being fully recycled back to business through a cut in employers' National Insurance Contributions (NICs) and additional support for energy efficiency measures. The levy package is also expected to be broadly neutral between manufacturing and services.

It is not possible to say what the exact final impact of the levy package on specific regions will be. That will depend on a number of factors, including the future energy consumption of firms in the region, the level of employment in those firms, the number of energy intensive sectors in the region that are eligible to receive a discount on the main rates of the levy by signing up to an energy efficiency agreement, what use firms in the region make of electricity generated from 'new' renewable sources of energy and in 'good quality' combined heat and power plants, and the extent to which firms in the region take advantage of the proposed introduction of a system of enhanced capital allowances for energy saving investments.

Excise Duty (Fuel)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the impact on exchequer income of reducing the excise duty on lead replacement fuel to the level for unleaded fuel. [102774]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The cost of a reduction in the excise duty on lead replacement fuel to that of unleaded fuel in 2000–01 is estimated at £45 million.

Personal Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money was received by the Exchequer in each of the financial years 1994–95 to 1998–99 as a result of the reinstatement of public service employees who were mis-sold personal pensions into public service pension schemes. [102796]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Public service pension schemes first received receipts in 1996–97 to pay for the reinstatement of employees identified under Phase 1 of the mis-selling review as having been mis-sold personal pensions. Receipts from this source, which are matched by future benefits to pensioners, have been received in all subsequent years but not all of the unfunded schemes financed from the Exchequer have separately identified receipts from this source throughout this period. With the exception of the NHS Pensions Scheme, the profile of Exchequer receipts relating to the main public service pension schemes is estimated as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1994–95	0
1995–96	0
1996–97	1
1997–98	44
1998–99	115

In addition, receipts relating to the NHS Pensions Scheme up to the end of 1998–99 totalled approximately £500 million, of which £227 million was received between August 1998 and March 1999, and the balance between October 1996 and July 1998. A more detailed breakdown of these receipts could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. These figures exclude receipts by public service pension schemes which are not financed by the Exchequer, such as the Local Government Pension Scheme.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 448W, if he will provide a breakdown of receipts in respect of public service employees mis-sold personal pensions being reinstated into public service

pension schemes, including the *(a)* number of employees involved, *(b)* public sector schemes of which they were members and *(c)* average payment. [102815]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The estimates given in my earlier answer, of receipts of £100 million to 160 million in this financial year and each of the following three financial years, were global estimates as detailed forecasting would not be productive given the uncertainties about the number of cases of mis-selling which Phase 2 of the review will identify, how restitution will be made and how fast cases will be dealt with. Receipts relating to reinstatements, mainly from Phase 1 of the review, in the current financial year are now expected to be approximately £195 million, bringing cumulative receipts up to the end of 1999–2000 to about £850 million. The latest estimate of receipts in the following three years is £100 million to 200 million a year. This is based on an expectation of receipts of about £95 million next year from schemes other than the NHS, with no certainty about the level of receipts thereafter. In addition, it is estimated that the NHS Pensions Scheme will receive about £300 million in respect of Phase 2 cases, based on an expectation that some 50,000 cases will require reinstatement to the NHS Pensions Scheme at an average cost of £6,000 each. The NHS Phase 2 receipts are assumed to be spread evenly over the next three years.

Winter Deaths

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the excess winter deaths for each English region, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1998–99. [100919]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 20 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question asking for the excess winter deaths for each English region, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1998–99.

Excess winter deaths are defined by the ONS as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

Figures for Scotland are now the responsibility of the Scottish Executive. Figures are provided in the attached table for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Numbers of excess winter deaths can vary greatly from year to year, depending, for example, on the winter's severity or the occurrence of infectious disease epidemics. Figures are therefore presented for years 1988/89 to 1998/99. The figures for the final year are provisional.

Excess winter mortality by standard region of usual residence, 1988–89 to 1998–99, England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Standard region	*1988–89*	*1989–90*	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[1]
North	1,230	3,030	1,980	2,580	1,590	1,990	1,610	2,490	2,620	1,760	2,830
Yorks and Humberside	2,310	4,660	3,650	3,980	2,470	3,120	2,790	4,040	4,550	2,460	4,870
North West	3,530	6,900	5,460	4,650	3,700	2,610	3,400	5,220	5,960	2,550	7,080
East Midlands	1,650	3,540	3,040	3,150	2,180	2,470	2,330	2,930	3,540	2,000	4,200
West Midlands	2,200	4,890	4,050	3,370	2,590	2,410	2,310	4,160	4,530	2,450	4,990
East Anglia	1,180	1,770	1,700	1,200	1,120	1,150	1,180	1,600	2,140	1,070	2,250
South East	6,380	14,470	11,930	10,740	8,360	8,690	9,310	13,240	16,450	7,200	14,730
South West	1,830	5,110	3,910	3,350	2,190	2,590	2,840	4,140	5,060	2,230	4,300
Country											
England	20,330	44,370	35,720	33,010	24,190	25,030	25,760	37,810	44,850	21,730	45,240
Wales	920	2,950	2,330	1,990	1,610	1,010	1,650	2,440	2,880	1,290	3,000
Northern Ireland	350	−1,170	900	960	410	640	660	80	230	600	1,180

[1] Provisional

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 8 October on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Sawyer. [103087]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend replied to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire on 17 December.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 27 October on behalf of his constituent Mr. Jones. [103085]

Ms Quin: My noble Friend the Minister of State replied to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire on 16 December.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 22 October on behalf of his constituent Ms Hodson. [103084]

Mr. Morley: I replied on 14 December 1999 to the right hon. Member's letter of 22 October on behalf of Ms Hodson.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Ludlow dated 20 July concerning CJD and BSE. [102685]

Ms Quin: My noble Friend the Minister of State replied to the letter from the hon. Member for Ludlow on 17 December.

EU Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 14 to 15 December; and if he will make a statement. [103470]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the UK at the Agriculture Council meeting in Brussels on 14 December, accompanied by Ross Finnie, Minister for Rural Affairs in the Scottish Executive.

The Council agreed to postpone for 12 months the introduction of compulsory labelling of beef in the light of evidence that the majority of member states would be unable to guarantee the integrity of such labels. Only France voted against. The precise legal form of the measure would depend upon the terms of the European Parliament's opinion on the Commission proposal, due to be delivered later in the week.

The Council also decided by QM (Portugal voting against) to defer for six months implementation of a 1997 Decision on Community-wide measures controlling Specified Risk Material pending agreement on a new Decision.

The Council agreed that adjustments to export refunds for processed agricultural products in order to meet budgetary and WTO limits should in future be governed by a strategic and targeted approach rather than via across the board cuts in refund rates. Officials were mandated to develop this strategy urgently with a view to adoption by March 2000 at the latest. I pointed out that in the medium term, the solution was to bring down CAP support prices. Meanwhile I endorsed the Council's proposed approach and expressed regret at the Commission's decisions to apply across the board refund cuts to date.

Commissioner Byrne updated the Council on developments in response to last summer's dioxin crisis and on the Commission's plans in relation to food safety. Commissioner Fischler reported on his participation in the recent WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle and on new Commission proposals for reform of the CAP cotton regime.

EU Fisheries Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Fisheries Council held in Brussels on 16 and 17 December; and if he will make a statement. [103840]

Mr. Morley: I represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of the EU Fisheries Council in Brussels on 16–17 December, together with Mr. John Home Robertson, Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs in the Scottish Executive and Mrs. Brid Rodgers, the Northern Ireland Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, the first Minister from the newly devolved administration to attend an EU Council.

The Council agreed by qualified majority, with France voting against, the total allowable catches (TACs) and quotas to apply in 2000 in Community waters and for Community vessels fishing in waters where catch limitations apply. Details of the final TACs are given in the following table.

Following from the advice of fisheries scientists in the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), the Commission had initially proposed substantial cuts in many TACs, reflecting the poor state of some stocks, reduced recruitment to them or the need to bring fishing effort back to levels which will help to sustain the future availability of stocks. Working on the basis of the scientific advice but using some of the precautionary management options identified by the scientists, we were able to secure smaller cuts than originally proposed for a number of TACs including nephrops in Area VII, anglers (monk fish) in West of Scotland, the North Sea and in Area VII, and in some flat fish TACs. As a result, at the end of the negotiations, the total UK quotas agreed were some 95,000 tonnes higher in cod equivalent tonnes than in the Commission proposals. This increase reduces the estimated loss of quota value to the industry in 2000 from £70 million to £40 million.

Recognising the need to take steps to promote the recovery of the badly depleted cod stock in the Irish Sea, we were able to secure a Council and Commission commitment to introduce a recovery programme, after consultation with a new regional group made up of fishermen, scientists, and administrators involved in this fishery. The Commission will for the first time use the emergency conservation powers available to it to bring forward measures closing those areas in the Irish Sea in which spawning cod congregate from February to April 2000, as a way of protecting the stock. This commitment to an EU recovery programme, which followed intensive preparatory discussions between us, the Irish and the Commission, sets an important precedent for regional co-operation under the Common Fisheries Policy and the involvement of the industry in management decisions on stock recovery.

The Council also agreed on the closure from 1 January 2000 of the sandeel fishery off the Firth of Forth in the interests of protecting seabirds dependent on sandeels. This measure which is in line with scientific advice resulted from close co-operation between us, Denmark and the Commission.

The Council further agreed not to reduce in 2000 the minimum landing size for plaice to 22 cm. As a result, I am pleased to confirm that this will remain at 27 cm.

I successfully invoked the Hague Preference on all those stocks where it was in our overall interest to do so.

The Regulation on TACs and Quotas adopted by the Council incorporates for the first time in a single Regulation the outcome of all the Community's international fisheries arrangements for 2000 between the Community and Norway, Faroes, Greenland and Iceland, and under the North West Atlantic Fisheries Organisation and the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission.

The Council also adopted unanimously, with Portugal abstaining, the Regulation applying control measures for Community vessels in 2000 required under the North East Atlantic Fisheries Organisation arrangements.

Commissioner Fischler confirmed that he would be meeting the Moroccan Minister of Fisheries on 20 December to initiate negotiations on a new fisheries

agreement between the EU and Morocco. He also made brief presentations on a Commission report on regional meetings, which will become available and be considered from January 2000, and the Commission's proposals for further amendment of the Technical Conservation Regulation, which includes provision for a three year closure of the Firth of Forth sandeel fishery.

2000 TACs

Stock	*1999 TAC (tonnes)*	*2000 TAC (tonnes)*	*Gain/Loss (%)*
Sandeels IIa, IV	1,000,000	1,020,000	2
Herring I, II	1,300,000	1,252,000	–4
Herring IVa,b	240,000	240,000	0
Herring IVc, VIId	25,000	25,000	0
Herring Vb, VIaN, VIb	68,000	42,000	–38
Herring VIa (Clyde)	1,000	1,000	0
Herring VIIa	6,600	5,350	–19
Herring VIIe,f	1,000	1,000	0
Herring VIIg-k	21,000	21,000	0
Herring IIa, IV Ind. by-catch	30,000	36,000	20
Cod IIa, IV	132,400	81,000	–39
Cod Vb, VI, XII, XIV	11,800	7,480	–37
Cod VIIa	5,500	2,100	–62
Cod VIIb-k, VIII, IX, X	19,000	16,000	–16
Megrim IIa, IV	3,000	3,000	0
Megrim Vb, VI, XII, XIV	4,840	4,840	0
Megrim VII	22,400	17,920	–20
Dab and Flounder IIa, IV	30,070	30,070	0
Anglers IIa, IV	22,070	17,660	–20
Anglers Vb, VI, XII, XIV	8,600	8,000	–7
Anglers VII	26,670	23,000	–14
Haddock IIa, IV	88,550	73,000	–18
Haddock Vb, VI, XII, XIV	19,000	19,000	0
Haddock VII, VIII, IX, X	22,000	13,200	–40
Haddock VIIa	4,990	3,400	–32
Whiting IIa, IV	44,000	30,000	–32
Whiting Vb, VI, XII, XIV	6,300	4,300	–32
Whiting VIIa	4,400	2,640	–40
Whiting VIIb-k	25,000	22,500	–10
Hake IIa, IV	1,930	1,480	–23
Hake Vb, VI, VII, XII, XIV	30,910	23,600	–24
Lemon sole and witch IIa, IV	12,000	12,000	0
Blue whiting IIa NS	90,000	90,000	0
Blue whiting Vb, VI, VII, XII, XIV	407,000	407,000	0
Blue whiting VIIIabde	26,500	26,500	0
Nephrops IIa, IV	15,200	17,200	13
Nephrops Vb, VI	12,600	12,600	0
Nephrops VII	23,000	21,000	–9
Northern prawn IIa, IV	7,013	7,113	1
Plaice IIa, IV	102,000	97,000	–5
Plaice Vb, VI, XII, XIV	2,400	2,400	0
Plaice VIIa	2,400	2,400	0
Plaice VIId,e	7,400	6,500	–12
Plaice VIIf,g	900	800	–11
Plaice VIIh,j,k	1,350	1,350	0
Pollack Vb, VI, XII, XIV	1,100	1,100	0
Pollack VII	17,000	17,000	0
Saithe IIa, IIIb,c,d, IV	110,000	85,000	–23
Saithe Vb, VI, XII, XIV	7,500	7,000	–7
Saithe VII, VIII, IX, X	8,800	6,500	–26
Turbot and brill IIa, IV	9,000	9,000	0
Skates and rays IIa, IV	6,060	6,060	0
Mackerel IIa(EC), III, IV Mackerel IIa (non EC), Vb, VI, VII, VIIIabde, XII, XIV	500,000	560,000	12

2000 TACs

Stock	*1999 TAC (tonnes)*	*2000 TAC (tonnes)*	*Gain/Loss (%)*
Sole II, IV	22,000	22,000	0
Sole Vb, VI, XII, XIV	155	155	0
Sole VIIa	900	1,080	20
Sole VIId	4,700	4,100	–13
Sole VIIe	700	660	–6
Sole VIIf,g	960	1,160	21
Sole VIIh,j,k	720	720	0
Sprat IIa, IV	175,000	225,000	29
Sprat VIId,e	12,000	12,000	0
Spurdog IIa, IV	8,870	9,470	7
Horse mackerel IIa, IV	60,000	51,000	–15
Horse mackerel Vb, VI, VII, VIIIa,b,d,e, XII, XIV	265,000	240,000	–9

Hill Farm Allowance

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many representations he has received in response to the Government paper, The Hill Farm Allowance Scheme in England; how many of them were from the West Country; and how long was the consultation period. [102172]

Ms Quin: The consultation paper was published on 5 November, and the deadline for responses was four weeks later on 3 December. By then we had received 48 responses. Most were from national organisations, but seven were sent from south-west interests.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what *(a)* economic and *(b)* environmental impact studies he has undertaken with regard to the effect on less favoured areas of the proposed Hill Farm Allowance Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [102173]

Ms Quin: In formulating the proposals account was taken of the evaluation report on the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance scheme in England which was published in April 1998, of the latest data on hill farm incomes, and of management reports on the less favoured areas overgrazing controls and other advice from the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency. The proposals also reflect an assessment of their likely redistributive effect. The impact of the new scheme will be monitored, and it will be reviewed in 2003.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the proposed Hill Farm Allowance Scheme will come into force in *(a)* England and *(b)* the rest of the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [102174]

Ms Quin: The proposed Hill Farm Allowance Scheme will apply only in England, and the first payments will be made during the early months of 2001.

Intervention Board

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the views of the *(a)* hygiene service and *(b)* Meat and Livestock Commission were sought on

each of the companies who submitted a tender in the recent award of contracts to abattoirs by the Intervention Board under the over-30-month scheme. [102357]

Ms Quin: Decisions were reached following a competitive tender under which bids were considered and evaluated against objective criteria by a Project Board. The Project Board's membership included representatives of the Intervention Board, the UK Agriculture Departments, the Meat Hygiene Service, the Meat and Livestock Commission, the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland Veterinary Service and the Livestock and Meat Commission.

Numeric Tagging

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department's cattle numeric tagging system will be in operation. [102065]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The change to numeric tagging will be effective from 17 January 2000.

GM Foods

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he intends to continue to process applications for *(a)* GM varieties to be placed on the national list and *(b)* the use of herbicides on GM crops in the period up to 2003. [101752]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* We intend to continue to process National List applications for GM varieties. However the Government have decided not to grant a commercial level of approval to any herbicide for use on a crop genetically modified to be tolerant to that particular herbicide unless and until such a time as the crop itself is legally on the market. In the meantime, approvals for such use will be restricted to experimental approvals to allow for the use of the pesticide in question on a limited scale so that research work may be carried out.

Rural Development

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the expenditure profile of each head of expenditure under the Rural Development Regulation for each of the seven years of the programme. [102800]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* Proposed expenditure under the England Rural Development Plan, subject to European Commission approval, and the Government's 2000 Spending Review is as follows:

£ million

	Financial year and RDR measure						
	2000–01	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*
Agri-environment	95	119	136	152	167	182	197
Farm Woodlands	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Increase in Woodland Grant Scheme	0	0	4	4	4	5	5
Less Favoured Areas	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
Rural Enterprise	0	8	12	24	36	36	36
Processing and Marketing	0	4	8	8	8	8	8
Training	1	2	3	4	4	4	4
Energy crops	0	4	5	5	5	5	5

Tuberculosis

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the progress of the trials being carried out to counter TB as recommended by the Krebs report. [102222]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) on 30 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 186W.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will publish the amount of the direct payments under the CAP that will be transferred to other payments through modulation in each of the seven years from 2001; [102786]

(2) if he will publish the amount of the direct payments under the CAP that will be transferred from each sector that currently receives direct payments to other payments through modulation in each of the seven years from 2001. [102787]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government announced their intention on 7 December to introduce modulation of farm payments as from 2001 and to use the funds released, with Government match funding, towards the seven-year Rural Development programme. A list of the farm payments affected is given in the following table.

Levels of modulation receipts will vary each year; proposed expenditure from these receipts under the Rural Development Plan (subject to European Commission approval, Parliamentary procedures and the Spending Review) is as follows, with deficits in some years being funded by carry over surplus receipts in others:

	£ million
2001–02	22
2002–03	45
2003–04	50
2004–05	54
2005–06	62
2006–07	70

CAP scheme payments

Sector	*Legal base*	*Notes*
Arable crops	Articles 2 and 5, Regulation (EC) No 1251/1999	Area payments including set-aside payments and including durum wheat and special aid
Potato starch	Article 8(2), Regulation (EEC) No 1766/92	Payment
Grain legumes	Article 1, Regulation (EC) No 1577/96	Area aid
Flax	Article 4, Regulation (EEC) No 1308/70	Area aid (the portion paid to farmers)
Hemp	Article 4, Regulation (EEC) No 1308/70	Area aid
Silkworms	Article 2, Regulation (EEC) No 845/72	Aid to encourage rearing
Tobacco	Article 3, Regulation (EEC) No 2075/92	Production aid
Seeds	Article 3, Regulation (EEC) No 2358/71	Production aid
Hops	Article 12, Regulation (EEC) No 1696/71 Regulation (EC) No 1098/98	Area aid Payments for temporary resting only
Beef and veal	Articles 4, 5, 6 and 10, 11, 13, Regulation (EC) No 1254/1999	Special premium, deseasonalisation premium, suckler cow premium (including when paid for heifers and including the additional national suckler cow premium when co-financed), slaughter premium, extensification payment, additional payments
Milk and dairy products	Articles 16 and 17, Regulation (EC) No 1256/1999	Dairy premium and additional payment
Sheep and goats	Article 5, Regulation (EC) No 2467/98	Ewe and she-goat premium and LFA supplements
Agri-money	Articles 4 and 5 of Regulation (EC) No 2799/98; Articles 2 and 3 of Regulation (EC) No 2800/98	Payments to producers (including those under the transitional Regulation)
Poseidon	Articles 5, 13(1), 17, Regulation (EEC) No 3763/91	Sectors: beef and veal, development of fruit, plants and flowers, sugar

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the percentages of direct payments under the CAP that will be modulated in each of the seven years from 2001. [102785]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government announced on 7 December their intention to introduce modulation of farm payments as from 2001 and to use the funds released, with Government match funding, towards the seven-year Rural Development programme. In 2001, 2.5 per cent. of payments will be modulated, rising to 3 per cent. in 2002, 3.5 per cent. in 2003 and 2004 and 4.5 per cent. in 2005 and 2006.

Ministerial Communications (French Agriculture Minister)

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions he has *(a)* met the French Agriculture Minister and *(b)* spoken to him by telephone since 8 November. [102791]

Mr. Nick Brown: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 16 December 1999, *Official Report,* column 285W.

Apiculture

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how the money promised by the Government in 1998 in order to tackle varroa disease and to educate beekeepers to become more self-reliant was spent; and if he will make a statement. [102454]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government fund a range of measures in England through their bee health programme, which is delivered by the Central Science Laboratory's National Bee Unit. In 1998–99 the programme cost £1.3 million. The measures included a free diagnostic service for varroa, American Foul Brood and European Foul Brood as well as providing training and guidance on how to improve bee husbandry to help control bee diseases. Under the latter we issued a new leaflet on varroa monitoring to help beekeepers time treatments. This was accompanied by a varroa mite calculator.

In addition in 1998–99 we spent around £248,000 on research and development (mainly on varroa), including a new five-year project on the biological control of varroa.

Arrangements for bee health matters in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly respectively.

Over-30-month Scheme

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the names and addresses of the slaughterhouses awarded slaughter contracts under the over-30-month scheme by the Intervention Board. [102919]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The names and addresses of abattoirs to whom OTMS slaughtering contracts were offered and accepted are as follows.

England

ABP Nuneaton
St. Mary's Road
Nuneaton
Coventry
CV11 SAS

J. A. Jewitt
Low House
Middlestone
Spennymoor
Co. Durham

Alec Jarrett
High Street
Oldham Common
Bristol
BS15 6TN

Madron Meat
The Abattoir
Madron
Penzance
TR20 8SF

Anglo Dutch
The Abattoir
Charing
Kent
TN27 0JL

North West Meats
The Abattoir
Dunkerley Street
Oldham
O12 7SX

Beesons (Bradeley Meats Ltd.)
Bradeley Hall Road
Haslington
Crewe, Cheshire
CW1 5QN

R. B. Elliott & Son
Stud Farm
Calow
Chesterfield
S44 5UN

Bridgwater Beef
Comeytrowe Lane
Taunton
Somerset
TA2 6EA

Southern Counties Fresh Food Ltd.
Munchelney Road
Huish Episcopi
Langport
Somerset
TA10 9HG

E. J. Duerden
Lindal Moor Abattoir
Lindal
Ulverston
Cumbria
LA12 0LT

Wholesale Meat Supply
Wood Street
Great Harwood
Blackburn
Lancashire
BB6 7UA

F. Redfern
Haslin Abattoir
Buxton
SK17 9HT

Woolley Brothers
Rother Valley Way
Holbrook
Sheffield
S20 5RW

Wales

Oriel Jones
Oriel Jones & Son Ltd.
Teify Park Abattoir
Llanybydder
Carmarthenshire
SA40 9QE

TWM
Glanlliedi Butchers
Unit 1
Dafen
Llanelli
SA14 8PD

Scotland

Holbeck Holdings Ltd.
Kilmarnock Abattoir
Dundonald Road
Kilmarnock
Ayrshire

Matheson Jess
The Abattoir
Montrose Road
Brechin
Tayside
DD9 7PL

Northern Ireland

Calf Marketing Services
73 Largy Road
Crumlin
Co. Antrim
BT29 4RS

Dungannon Meats
Woodside Industrial Estate
Woodside Road
Ballymena
Co. Antrim.

Subsequently the abattoir at Llanybydder withdrew its tender, and the Intervention Board is in discussions with a potential alternative. The award of any further contract will be announced by Press Notice.

Organophosphates

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to assess the Committee on Toxicity report on organophosphates. [103250]

Ms Quin: We are today publishing the advice Ministers have received from the Veterinary Products Committee (VPC), the Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) and the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) on the regulatory implications of the report on organophosphates (OPs) by the Committee on Toxicity (COT). Copies of this advice have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

This Government have ensured that OPs have been subject to a more rigorous and transparent scrutiny than ever before. Publication of this advice, and our conclusions on it, marks the end of a key stage in that process.

The regulatory committees all take note from the COT report that any ill-health effects from prolonged low-level exposure to OPs remain unproven, although there remains a question over whether there may be a small group of

individuals particularly susceptible to OPs. They endorse the need for further research to address this and the other areas of uncertainty identified by COT.

On the basis of current scientific knowledge, the regulatory committees advise against any general withdrawal of OPs from the market. However, in the light of the research by the Institute of Occupational Medicine, which identified the main risk of exposure to OP sheep dips as coming from the concentrate, the VPC has advised that all OP sheep dips should be withdrawn from the market pending the introduction of new containers which would minimise operator exposure.

The Government accept this advice. We shall be implementing the committees' advice and carrying forward work on OPs through a four point plan.

Firstly, we are taking immediate action on OP sheep dip concentrate containers. The Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) has today written to all holders of marketing authorisations for OP sheep dips requiring the withdrawal of these products from the market until containers are introduced which will minimise operator exposure to OP concentrate. Product recall from distributors and farms will also be implemented. The issues surrounding packaging of OP pesticides are rather different. However, in line with the ACP advice, the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD) is taking urgent action to confirm that all containers of OP pesticides concentrates comply with modern standards; and PSD will take regulatory action if they do not.

Secondly, we are ensuring that data packages for OP compounds enable full evaluations in line with modern safety standards through the continuing reviews of OP veterinary medicines other than sheep dips (by the VPC) and of anticholinesterase pesticides (by the ACP). The ACP has recommended that regulatory action should be taken against approvals for products containing three OP compounds for which supporting data have not been submitted under the anticholinesterase review. Revocations of the approvals are being sent immediately to approval holders. This means that in all 14 OP compounds (more than half the OP compounds formerly approved) have now been revoked as a result of this major review.

Thirdly, we shall be implementing measures aimed at continuing to promote best practice. For sheep dip, we accept the advice from the Health and Safety Commission that extension of mandatory certification would not be appropriate. Best practice will be promoted through a range of measures including further improvements to labelling to highlight necessary precautions in the light of the IOM report; a continuing programme of targeted inspections by HSE inspectors to reinforce messages on risk control and training and competence for sheep dippers; and supply of protective gloves with sheep dip. We have also decided not to further extend mandatory certification for pesticides uses in the light of the advice we have received and comments on the consultation we conducted earlier this year. We shall, however, be improving the guidance and the syllabus for the certificate of competence in this area.

Fourthly, MAFF, acting jointly with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health, intend to develop a targeted research programme to take forward the research recommendations from COT and the regulatory committees. We want to involve expertise from the wider scientific community in this process. We therefore plan to hold a broadly based seminar in the new year to determine the scientific input and approaches required to meet these defined research needs. In addition, we are currently discussing a proposal to investigate databases of people who believe they are suffering from the effects of OPs. We hope to conclude contractual negotiations with a view to the project starting as early as possible in the new year.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 21 December 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the measures taken in each month since November 1998 *(a)* to reduce security activity and *(b)* to remove security installations. [101881]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The following table lists the measures taken to reduce security activity and remove security installations since November 1998.

Date	*Occurrence*
17 November 1998	Drumadd Roulement Battalion Rear Based
23 November 1998	Demolition of 3 Bessbrook Permanent Vehicle Control Points (PVCP)
November 1998	Cessation of routine military patrolling in Newry
November 1998	Cessation of military patrolling on the City side and Waterside, Londonderry
24–26 January 1999	Vacation of Patrol Bases at Mullan Bridge, Roscor Bridge, Wattle Bridge, Clonratty Bridge, Gortmullan Bridge, Killyvilly and Annaghmartin
3 February 1999	Demolition of Aughnacloy PVCP
8 February 1999	Demolition of V3 PVCP (Hump)
12 February 1999	Demolition of V4 PVCP (Muff)
26 February 1999	Demolition of V1 PVCP (Letterkenny)
21 May 1999	Demolition of Fort Whiterock completed
9 July 1999	Plot 854 in Crossmaglen returned to the GAA
4 August 1999	Demolition of Gortmullan Patrol Base completed
5 September 1999	Vacation of Carrickfergus Base

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

E-commerce

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on the development of e-commerce of separate charges made by banks for internet purchases; and if he will make a statement. [99879]

Dr. Howells: The Government are committed to the rapid development of e-commerce in the UK. Our policy is to make the UK the best place in the world for e-commerce by 2002. To help us achieve this, the Prime Minister commissioned the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit, in January this year, to undertake a project that would recommend how this can be achieved. Their report—"e-commerce@its.best.uk"—was launched by the Prime Minister on 13 September. All 60 recommendations have been accepted by the Government.

In November 1998 the Chancellor of the Exchequer set up an independent review of the UK retail banking market, chaired by Don Cruickshank. In line with the recommendations in "e-commerce@its.best.uk", the issues under consideration by Don Cruickshank include the involvement of banks in payments made over the Internet. They expect to publish the results of their work in February 2000.

Corporate Assets

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the value of land and property in (i) Scotland, (ii) the United Kingdom, (iii) overseas and (iv) total within the responsibility of the *(a)* Office of Fair Trading, *(b)* Office of Telecommunications, *(c)* Office of Gas Supply, *(d)* Office of Electricity Regulation and *(e)* Export Credits Guarantee Department. [99815]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 November 1999]:* *(a)* The Office of Fair Trading does not own any land or property.

(b) The Office of Telecommunications (OFTEL) does not own any land or property.

(c) The Office of Gas Supply has land and property of estimated value of £1.7 million in Leicester—none in Scotland and none overseas.

(d) The Office of Electricity Regulation does not own any land or property holdings.

(e) The Export Credits Guarantee Department (ECGD) does not own any land or property.

Gas Cookers

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to assess the safety of gas cookers; and if he will make a statement. [101162]

Dr. Howells: The safety of new and second-hand gas cookers is controlled by the Gas Appliances (Safety) Regulations 1995 and the Gas Cooking Appliances (Safety) Regulations 1989.

I have no plans to undertake any assessment at this time.

Compliance Costs

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what evaluation he has made of the total

compliance cost to British business of regulations introduced by Her Majesty's Government since May 1997. [101834]

Mr. Byers: Individual regulatory impact assessments contain such an evaluation.

Explosives Acts

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive the report from the Health and Safety Executive on its review of the Explosives Acts of 1875 and 1923. [101808]

Dr. Howells: I understand that the Health and Safety Executive intends to publish a consultative document on its review of explosives legislation next summer.

Sri Lanka (Exports)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those goods requiring an export licence which have been licensed for export to Sri Lanka since 1 May 1997. [102184]

Dr. Howells: For the period 2 May 1997 to 19 October 1999, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) on 4 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 281–82W.

The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 20 October and 30 November 1999, seven Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and no Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Sri Lanka of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings.

Where this is so, the licence is included in the Table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual Licences issued between 20 October 1999 and 30 November 1999 covering the export to Sri Lanka of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML2	2
ML4	1
ML6	1
ML11	1
ML21	1
PL5017	2

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 307–08W.

In addition, Sri Lanka is a permitted destination on certain Open General Export Licences covering the export of goods on the Military List. Copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Black Shaheen

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date approval was given for the licence for export of the Black Shaheen missile to the United Arab Emirates; if an inter departmental Committee gave its approval to the licence; and if Ministers of *(a)* his own or *(b)* other Departments were consulted prior to licence approval. [102138]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by the then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 149W. The position stated there remains unchanged.

Consumer Advice

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will investigate the adequacy of the availability of consumer advice provided by local authorities to the public; and if he will make a statement. [102458]

Dr. Howells: The recent Audit Commission report: "Measure for Measure: the Best Value Agenda for Trading Standards Services" confirmed the Government's analysis, as set out in the White Paper: "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" (Cmnd 4410), that the quality and availability of consumer advice varies across the country. The White Paper outlined our proposals to ensure that people have easier access to high quality advice. The Government will promote the development of a joined-up approach to the provision of advice through CABx, local authorities and independent advice agencies, linking with the Community Legal Service.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of the total work force in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102727]

Mr. Byers: On 1 April 1999, the percentage of staff in the DTI of ethnic minority origin was 14.3 per cent. This includes staff in DTI Headquarters, but excludes casual staff and staff in Government Offices and Executive Agencies.

My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, set out in his reply of 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 264W, corporate action across the Civil Service to encourage the employment of people from ethnic minorities. This Department continues to raise awareness of the DTI through careers events focusing on ethnic minority groups. The Department consults advisers on diversity and racial awareness issues and constantly reviews its recruitment procedures.

Labelling (Animal Testing)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to require manufacturers clearly to label any product which has been tested, or contains ingredients which have been tested, on animals; and if he will make a statement. [102992]

Dr. Howells: As far as cosmetic products are concerned, the European Commission are currently drafting labelling guidelines for manufacturers who wish to voluntarily label their products in respect of animal testing.

I have no plans to make such labelling compulsory, beyond the provisions already set out in the Cosmetic Products (Safety) Regulations 1996.

Departmental Computers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on how many occasions in each of the past five years computer systems in his Department have been illegally accessed by computer hackers *(a)* within and *(b)* outside the Department. [102834]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* Over the past five years there have been two reported occasions on which my Department's computer systems have been illegally accessed by computer hackers. One incident reported in 1996 was external and the other in 1999 was internal and both were classified as minor incidents. There was also one minor incident reported in 1999 which, technically speaking, did not involve access by computer hackers but where one of my Department's systems was illegally used as a redistribution point for e-mail traffic. There have also been five reported unsuccessful hacking attempts over the past five years. These figures include next step agencies.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many cases of computer *(a)* hacking, *(b)* fraud, including fraudulent use of computer chips and *(c)* theft his Department has recorded in the last five years. [102835]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* Records of IT security incidents reported within my Department for the period in question show:

Year	*Hacking incidents (excluding minor incidents of computer misuse)*	*Fraud (all computer chip thefts)*	*Theft (excluding computer chips)*
1995	4	14	48
1996	1	8	30
1997	0	2	17
1998	1	5	20
1999	2	4	15

Two of the hacking incidents were successful but of a minor nature.

One of the 1999 hacking incidents, technically speaking did not involve the hacking into a computer. In this particular incident, an e-mail server was illegally used to redistribute e-mail messages. The incident was the result of a temporary configuration error which was then corrected.

These figures include next step agencies.

Manufacturing (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the amount of EU subsidies paid to manufacturing industry within Worcestershire for *(a)* the calendar year 1998 and *(b)* the financial year 1998–99. [103308]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There are no direct operating EU-funded subsidies available to Worcestershire businesses. However, a number of grant schemes, each with specific purposes, operate with EC approval and some are supported in part by EU funds. The most significant to firms in Worcestershire are: Regional Selective Assistance, which is available in the Redditch and Bromsgrove areas; local schemes delivered as part of the Marches Objective 5b programme, which covers some western parts of the county; and SMART, which operates throughout the county.

Three offers of Regional Selective Assistance were made to firms in Worcestershire during the 1998 calendar year and the 1998–99 financial year. The total amount of grant aid offered in these cases was £137,000.

It is estimated that Worcestershire companies benefited from ERDF funding of approximately £250,000 and ESF funding of approximately £75,000 through the Marches Objective 5b programme in 1998. These sums represent grants to individual companies through delegated grant schemes delivered through Business Links and co-financing measures. The ERDF and ESF totals for the financial year 1998–99 were of similar magnitude.

SMART offers totalling £534,384 were made to Worcestershire firms in calendar year 1998 and £428,880 in financial year 1998–99.

Manufacturing Job Losses

Mr. Jim Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he plans to take to prevent further job losses in textile, clothing and footwear manufacture. [103643]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Employment and output in the UK textiles and clothing industry depends upon its global competitiveness. The Department of Trade and Industry helps the industry achieve the necessary levels of competitiveness in a variety of ways, including through the provision of support to around 25 individual competitiveness projects.

In addition, an industry-led group (the Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group) has been established to consider the strategic issues affecting the industry. My Department has been facilitating the work of this Group and I look forward to seeing the Group's final report in the New Year.

White Zone

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the timing of the next round of licensing in respect of the White Zone. [103479]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* I hope to be in a position to invite applications for licences in the White Zone by the middle of next year. In relation to future licensing we are committed to ensuring that our processes are consistent with the provisions of the Habitats Directive.

Vaccine Exports (Iraq)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policy on the export of diphtheria, tetanus and yellow fever vaccines for Iraqi children. [103212]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* While the export from the United Kingdom of diphtheria, tetanus and yellow fever vaccines is not normally subject to control, the export from the UK to Iraq of any goods, unless under authority of an export licence, is prohibited by the Export of Goods (Control) (Iraq and Kuwait Sanctions) Order 1990 [SI 1990/1640], which came into force on 9 August 1990. All applications for a licence to export goods to Iraq are considered very carefully.

Vaccines for yellow fever and diphtheria vaccines are also covered by the Import and Export (ImpEx) mechanism established under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1051. This mechanism requires certain goods, as specified in a UN agreed list, to be subject to special controls, including the monitoring of their end use in Iraq by UNSCOM because they are capable of being used in weapons of mass destruction programmes; tetanus vaccines are not covered by the ImpEx mechanism.

Since UNSCOM officials left Iraq in December 1998, they have been unable to monitor the importation and end use of goods covered by the ImpEx mechanism. Applications for licences to export such goods to Iraq are therefore processed on a case-by-case basis and will be granted only if the Government is satisfied that the particular export would be subject to appropriate controls and monitoring in Iraq.

TUPE Regulations

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many breaches of the TUPE Regulations there have been in the last 12 months. [103644]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Employees or employee representatives who consider that their rights under these Regulations have been infringed may seek legal redress. In 1998–99, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 505 complaints were made to the Employment Tribunals alleging unfair dismissal by reason of a transfer of an undertaking, and 886 alleging breach of the requirements relating to information and consultation of employee representatives about a transfer of an undertaking. Statistics are not available to show what proportion of these complaints were upheld; some of the cases are still ongoing. Redress for unlawful changes to terms and conditions by reason of a transfer of an undertaking may be sought either from the civil courts or, in certain circumstances, the Employment Tribunals. These are not identified separately from other breach of contract complaints in the available statistics.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what mechanisms exist to monitor the observance of the TUPE Regulations by private sector employers. [103645]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The TUPE Regulations, like other aspects of the employment rights legislation, provide for those who consider that their rights have been infringed to seek redress through the Employment Tribunals or, in appropriate cases, the civil courts. The number of cases brought gives an indication of the extent to which private sector employers are observing the Regulations.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to amend the TUPE Regulations. [103716]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department intends to publish shortly a public consultation document setting out detailed proposals for the amendment of these Regulations. The Government's aim in putting forward the proposals will be to improve the Regulations operation and to implement requirements of a revised EC Acquired Rights Directive successfully negotiated last year as a social affairs priority under the UK Presidency. This will be to the benefit of employers, employees and the economy as a whole.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103856]

Mr. Byers: The Department's targets for increasing productivity and reducing running costs are set out in its Public Service Agreement, which is available in the Library of the House within "Public Services for the Future: Modernisation, Reform, Accountability" (CM 4181). Revised targets are being drawn up for new Public Service and Service delivery Agreements that will be published after the completion of the 2000 Spending Review.

World Trade Organisation

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish a timetable of action needed to re-establish the WTO talks. [103225]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* There is no formal timetable. The first step is for consultations between WTO member governments on the way forward. We would hope that the Round could be launched next year or in 2001. In the meantime, we need, as I have said, to press on urgently with reform of WTO processes so that WTO members are able to work more effectively in the preparation, launch and conduct of trade negotiations.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to *(a)* the EU and *(b)* the US Government about reinstating the WTO talks. [103224]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* I discussed these issues with my EU colleagues in the Council of Ministers on the eve of our departure from Seattle. Since Seattle I have been in touch with Commissioner Lamy and my other EU colleagues. We remain agreed on the need to launch a comprehensive Round and there is widespread recognition in the EU and WTO of the need for WTO reform. These matters have also been discussed in the context of the EU/US Summit on 17 December.

Car Hire Companies (Petrol Charges)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will investigate the petrol prices charged to customers by car hire companies. [103578]

Dr. Howells: I have no such plans.

Blue Arrow Plc

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the report concerning Blue Arrow plc to which his Department referred in its written answers of 30 June and 14 July 1992. [103557]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The inspectors' report was published on 24 September 1992.

Indonesia

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the licence granted in November 1996 for the export of Hawk aircraft to Indonesia will cease to be valid. [103554]

Dr. Howells: As I stated in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on 29 October 1999, *Official Report,* column 1015W, all individual licences covering the export or transhipment to Indonesia of military goods or technology have been suspended in accordance with the Common Position, adopted on 16 September, by which EU member states decided to impose an arms embargo on Indonesia for four months. In that answer I also stated that, because the embargo is time restricted, the period of validity of the licences concerned has been extended by four months. Accordingly, the licence granted under the previous administration on 22 November 1996 for the export of sixteen 200 series Hawks has been suspended, and its period of validity extended by four months; it will now expire on 24 March 2001.

Export Licences

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences for strategic exports have been refused or revoked since July 1997 for exports of goods and technologies in connection with licensed production agreements. [103761]

Dr. Howells: Information on decisions to refuse export licence applications and to revoke licences is set out in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

It would entail disproportionate cost to identify which, if any, of the goods covered by applications refused and licences revoked since 2 May 1997 are intended for use in connection with overseas manufacturing facilities operating under a commercial licence issued by a UK company.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many additional assurances have been sought in the last three years, in connection with the granting of export licences, that goods and technologies will not be re-exported from licensed production facilities to countries of concern; and what the legal status is of these assurances. [103762]

Dr. Howells: Licences to export arms or other goods controlled for strategic reasons are issued by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, acting through the Export Control Organisation of the Department of Trade and Industry. All relevant individual licence applications are circulated by the DTI to other Government Departments with an interest, as determined by their policy responsibilities. These include the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development.

If, when an application is being considered, the Export Control Organisation of my Department is advised that additional information is required, for example specific supplementary end use assurances, the applicant is informed and the decision on their application is taken in light of the information subsequently received. Where an application concerns goods intended for use in connection with an overseas facility in which particular goods will be manufactured under a commercial licence issued by a UK company, that fact is not recorded on the Export Control Organisation's computer databases.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what representations he has received concerning the use by United Kingdom companies of overseas licensed production facilities to supply weapons to countries in conflict; [103671]

(2) what assessment he has made, during the consultation phases for new legislation on strategic export controls, of current US legislation regulating licensed production, with particular reference to the re-export of goods from licensed production factories; [103670]

(3) what plans the Government have to introduce legislation for the control of exports of controlled goods from licensed production facilities abroad. [103672]

Dr. Howells: A number of non-governmental organisations raised the issue of licensed production overseas in their responses to the 1998 White Paper on Strategic Export Controls. All the written responses to the White Paper were published by the Government on 30 November 1998, except for two for which complete confidentiality was requested.

The Government are considering the question of controls on licensed production overseas as part of their review of the proposals contained in the White Paper. In the course of this review the Government are looking at United States legislation regulating licensed production overseas.

The Government will announce proposals for new export control legislation, following conclusion of the review of the White Paper proposals.

EU-US Banana Dispute

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what assessment his Department has made of the damage to British companies as a result of American retaliatory action in the banana dispute between the EU and the US; [103947]

(2) what representations his Department has received from British companies whose business has been damaged by the banana dispute between the EU and the US. [103943]

Mr. Caborn: The United States has World Trade Organisation authority to retaliate up to an annual monetary value of $191.4 million against EU goods. The sectors that the US has chosen to include in this authorised retaliation, and the annual value of UK exports is as follows:

US Imports from UK—1997

US Tariff Code	*Description*	*£ million*
85072080	Batteries	13.78
33073050	Bath oils	7.29
49119120	Lithographs	2.20
63022190	Bed linen	1.48
48192000	Cartons	1.42
85167100	Coffee makers	0.37
42023210	Wallets	9.13
42022215	Handbags	0.09
48055000	Felt paper	0.02
Total		26.8

Source:
European Commission

The actual impact on UK companies in the targeted sectors will depend on a number of factors, including the length of time that the retaliatory measures remain in place and the ability of affected companies to find alternative customers for their goods. However, I have received many representations from UK companies affected by the US retaliation, and based upon these representations my assessment is that there is a real risk of damage to British companies in terms of lost trade and jobs. I take the risks very seriously, and this is why the Government and the European Commission are putting every possible effort into resolving this dispute once and for all.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department has taken to resolve the banana dispute between the EU and the US. [103946]

Mr. Caborn: The UK strongly encouraged the Commission to come forward with a formal proposal for a revised banana regime which ends the banana dispute once and for all and which meets the needs of the vulnerable banana producers. Since the Commission's proposal was tabled in November, we have been urging them to consult quickly with the relevant parties, including the US, so that a revised and acceptable banana regime is in place as soon as possible in 2000.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the number of jobs that *(a)* have been lost and *(b)* are at risk due to the increased tariff on certain British foods as a result of the banana dispute between the EU and the US. [103948]

Mr. Caborn: There are no British food exports on the list of products to which the United States has applied retaliatory duties as a result of the EU-US banana dispute.

Oil and Gas Production

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many fallow fields there are in the United Kingdom sector of the North sea and Atlantic ocean which have seen no development over the last ten years; and which company currently holds the licence to develop in each case. [103113]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The 108 significant oil and gas discoveries on the UKCS which have not been brought to development and which have been discovered for more than 10 years, are listed in the following table.

It is important to note that on many of them significant activity is taking place to bring discoveries to development.

Licence operator at the end of 1998	*Well number*	*Licence number*	*Date discovered*
Amerada	12/27–1	P.981	January 1983
Amerada	14/20–6Z	P.324	June 1976
Amerada	14/20b-18	P.324	October 1987
Amerada	15/21a-38Z	P.218	February 1989
Amerada	29/08b-2	P.227	December 1983
Amoco	30/12b-2	P.185	February 1981
Amoco	42/28a-3	P.016	April 1989
Amoco	43/18–1	P.512	November 1986
Amoco	43/19–1	P.607	January 1989
Amoco	43/20b-2	P.608	May 1989
ARCO	21/02–1	P.244	June 1975
ARCO	21/02–2	P.244	December 1975
ARCO	48/23–3	P.467	November 1987
ARCO	49/28–14	P.037	April 1987
ARCO	53/04–1	P.039	July 1967
BG E & P	214/30–1	P.303	August 1984
BG E & P	22/05b-3	P.356	May 1983
BG E & P	47/03b-4	P.016	July 1987
BP	30/01c-4	P.363	August 1986
BP	42/29–6	P.001	November 1989
BP	47/10–1	P.001	February 1985
BP	9/24b-1A	P.338	September 1983
BP	98/07–2	P.534	November 1987
Britoil	16/18–1	P.312	September 1983
Britoil	21/15a-2	P.120	August 1981
Britoil	211/18–9	P.236	September 1975
Britoil	48/07b-8	P.138	October 1989
Burlington	113/26–1	P.287	August 1982
CalEnergy	44/19–3	P.610	January 1989
Chevron	3/28a-2	P.234	September 1978
Conoco	16/23–4	P.103	July 1985
Conoco	21/03a-4	P.118	December 1985
Conoco	29/02a-2	P.224	June 1984
Conoco	48/09–2	P.459	May 1989

Licence operator at the end of 1998	Well number	Licence number	Date discovered
Conoco	48/10b-3	P.519	December 1987
Conoco	49/12a-6	P.033	September 1974
DNO	2/05–10	P.242	September 1979
Elf	16/22–2	P.240	May 1977
Elf	16/22–5	P.240	October 1989
Elf	3/30–3	P.229	April 1986
Elf	4/26-lA	P.229	June 1985
Elf Caledonia	14/18–1	P.263	May 1978
Elf Caledonia	14/19b-23	P.250	June 1989
Elf Caledonia	22/19–1	P.357	August 1984
Elf Caledonia	29/06a-3	P.244	September 1987
Enterprise	15/13–2	P.198	October 1975
Enterprise	22/12a-1	P.077	December 1987
Enterprise	22/13a-1	P.096	February 1989
Fina	21/27-lA	P.595	April 1989
Fina	210/15–2	P.226	October 1977
Fina	30/14–1	P.255	August 1989
Kerr McGee	110/03b-4	P.543	December 1988
Kerr McGee	211/19a-6	P.104	January 1977
Kerr McGee	3/03–11	P.202	March 1989
Kerr McGee	9/14b-4	P.277	March 1989
LASMO	16/12a-5	P.212	December 1984
LASMO	49/04–1	P.468	October 1984
Marathon	16/03a-4	P.108	September 1984
Mobil	48/22–1	P.697	November 1966
Mobil	49/29b-5	P.105	July 1987
Mobil	53/02–8	P.025	September 1989
Mobil	9/19–3	P.103	December 1976
Monument	21/28a-2	P.077	December 1986
Open	2/10a-6	P.234	December 1983
Open	22/02–2	P.354	February 1984
Open	22/02–5	P.354	October 1986
Open	41/24a-1	P.759	September 1969
Open	41/25a-1	P.759	September 1969
Open	48/21–1	P.047	August 1967
Open	98/11–2	P.406	August 1984
Petrobras	16/13a-2Z	P.219	January 1984
Petrobras	16/13a-3	P.219	November 1985
Petrobras	20/02–1	P.317	April 1981
Petrobras	30/03a-1	P.111	November 1989
Phillips	16/29–4	P.110	February 1975
Phillips	30/13–2	P.079	September 1972
Phillips	48/30–3	P.028	June 1967
Ranger	22/27a-2	P.114	March 1986
Ranger	29/09b-2	P.227	September 1985
Shell	21/19-lA	P.238	April 1981
Shell	21/23b-1	P.353	January 1982
Shell	21/30–12	P.013	September 1984
Shell	211/13–1	P.296	November 1974
Shell	211/13–2	P.296	July 1975
Shell	211/13–3	P.296	December 1975
Shell	211/14–1	P.296	April 1986
Shell	22/30a-5	P.012	November 1989
Shell	29/03a-2	P.012	January 1979
Shell	29/05a-1	P.188	September 1981
Shell	29/09a-1	P.012	June 1983
Shell	30/02–1	P.098	June 1971
Shell	30/06–3Z	P.011	May 1984
Shell	44/28–3	P.453	October 1987
Shell	48/14–2	P.008	December 1985
Shell	48/19a-3	P.008	March 1983
Shell	49/19–4	P.008	March 1986
Talisman	13/30–3	P.310	March 1986
Texaco	15/29a-3	P.119	July 1988
Texaco	207/01–3	P.183	October 1977
Texaco	9/11–2	P.335	September 1982
Total	206/01–2	P.911	September 1986
Total	3/19–1	P.239	December 1988
Total	3/19b-2	P.491	June 1988
Total	42/15b-1	P.137	June 1984
Total	9/15a-1	P.090	June 1987
Veba	15/18a-6	P.233	May 1986
Veba	211/22–1	P.201	May 1977
Veba	211/22a-3	P.201	March 1984

Notes:

1. The information in this table is frozen at 31 December 1998.
2. Some of these Significant Discoveries[2] may now be the subject of Development Plan discussions this year.

Source:

Fallow[1] Significant[2] Offshore Discoveries (extract from Appendix 3 of the DTI report: Development of the Oil and Gas Resources of the United Kingdom 1999)

[1] Fallow: Those Significant Discoveries that remain undeveloped for 10 years or more.

[2] Significant Discovery: The description "significant" generally refers to the flow rates achieved in well tests. It does not necessarily indicate the commercial potential of the discovery.

Business
(Social and Environmental Responsibility)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is undertaking to promote social and environmental responsibility in business. [103302]

Dr. Howells: On support for environmentally responsible business, my Department is continuing to help business reduce waste in the most cost-effective way, with a five-year and £30 million extension to the joint DTI/DETR Environmental Technologies Best Practice Programme. We are helping to overcome market and technical barriers to increased use of recycled materials with an initial £1.4 million programme as the first stage of a planned bigger joint DTI/DETR initiative. We are also helping business develop the "know-how" to incorporate sustainability in products and processes from design stage through the Sustainable Technologies Initiative, worth £7.8 million over three years.

The Joint Environmental Markets Unit is helping UK business win a bigger share of the rapidly growing market for environmental goods and services—$640 billion by 2010.

My Department support socially responsible business in a variety of ways, including encouraging the spread of best practice on socially responsible business practice. Work in this area includes sponsorship of Business in the Community's Awards for Business Excellence which acknowledges examples of excellence among businesses engaged in work with community partnerships. We are also working with Business in the Community on a programme to engage business in work to spread the use of information and communication technologies in the community.

On international trade, we have publicly declared our support for initiatives such as the Ethical Trading Initiative and the FairTrade Mark, and are participating in the current review of the OECD guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

We have also encouraged socially responsible business through a number of other activities, including improved protection for vulnerable workers and consumers and action to tackle fuel poverty. We have launched a fundamental review of company law which will consider

the proper purposes of a company and to whom and on what it should report publicly, including social and environmental issues.

The report "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity" outlines the Government's policies on investment, enterprise and innovation to address regional differences in economic and social performance.

Mortgages (Consumer Awareness)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is taking to help to raise consumer understanding of mortgage products. [103238]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry raised the quality of information which consumers receive about mortgage products at the summit held with major lenders, consumer groups and regulators on 29 October. Officials will convene a working group next month to look at how mortgage information can be improved. We also published ten key questions consumers should ask to help them choose the best mortgage deal.

Engineering

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out the terms of reference, objectives and timing for the engineering review being conducted jointly by his Department and the Engineering Council. [103768]

Mr. Byers: The broad aim of the working group led by Dr. Robert Hawley, Chairman of the Engineering Council, the "Hawley Group", is to review the contribution the Engineering Council should make to add value to the engineering community by improving the effectiveness of existing activities in such areas as the promotion and standards of engineering, building on existing synergies with other organisations.

The first stage of this work is intended to agree strategic objectives to be achieved over the next three years. It is hoped that the Hawley Group can complete this by the end of January 2000. The second stage will be the development of a strategy for achieving these objectives. The intention is to complete this second stage by the end of July 2000.

A copy of the full Terms of Reference for the Review has been placed in the Library.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what initiatives he has taken since his appointment to support *(a)* the engineering profession and *(b)* engineering industries. [103769]

Mr. Byers: My Department continues to provide financial support for project work arising from the Action for Engineering initiative, which promoted co-ordinated action to increase substantially the influence, involvement and achievement of professional engineers for the benefit of British industry. The most notable of these is SETNET (Science Engineering Technology Mathematics Network) which aims to bring coherence to the delivery of the somewhat fragmented range of activities aimed at promoting science, engineering, technology and mathematics to school teachers and pupils. It offers a one-stop shop for independent advice to teachers and industry on a range of issues through its regional network of 28 SETPOINTs. DTI and DfEE have provided SETNET with funding of over half a million pounds over the last three years.

We have also offered financial support of up to £175,000 p.a. for three years (possibly five depending on progress) for the Campaign to Promote Engineering (CPE).

Initiatives specifically to support the engineering industries and major engineering sectors have included:

Industry Forum Adaptation

DTI has now embarked upon a £15 million programme to fund up to 10 proposals from sectors to improve their supply chains, adapting from the SMMT Industry Forum model. Two programmes have already been announced under this; the Leading Oil and Gas Competitiveness (LOGIC) project to promote best practice through the oil and gas industry supply chain, and the Lean Aerospace Initiative (LAI).

Engineering Technicians Initiative

This initiative announced on 10 September supports the growth of clusters for the training of engineering technicians in manufacturing SMEs.

In addition, the Engineering Industries have benefited from a wide range of initiatives addressing the needs of manufacturing industry more generally. These are detailed in the publication "Manufacturing in the Knowledge Driven Economy" issued on 22 November.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* the engineering institutions and *(b)* engineering industries he has visited, and on what dates, since his appointment. [103770]

Mr. Byers: I have undertaken the following engagements with engineering groups and visited the following engineering companies since my appointment:

Date	*Engineering companies visited*	*Venue*
29 January	Visit to AES Engineering	Rotherham
5 February	Visit to Atlas Composites	Ilkeston, Derby
8 February	Visit to Airbus	Broughton, North Wales
8 February	Visit to Rover	Longbridge, West Midlands
19 February	Amereda Hess 'Triton Project'	Kvaerner, Port Clarence, Middlesbrough
25 February	Addressed the Institution of Electrical Engineers	Grosvenor House Hotel, London
19 March	Visit to LDV Ltd.	Birmingham
22 April	Opened the High Pressure Turbine Facility at Rolls Royce	Derby
27 April	Visit to Motorola	Bathgate, West Lothian
29 April	Addressed the Engineering Council Conference	The Royal Society of Arts London

Date	Engineering companies visited	Venue
5 May	Address to the Parliamentary Group for Engineering Development Annual Dinner	House of Lords
9 June	Visit Tensator Ltd.	Milton Keynes
25 June	Visit to 600 Lathes	Heckmondwicke, Yorkshire
6 July	Ground Breaking Ceremony for Honda	Swindon
6 September	Visit to Perlos	Washington, Sunderland
6 September	Visit to NSK Bearings	Peterlee, Durham
21 September	Visit to BT Advanced Communications Technology Centre	Martlesham, Nr. Ipswich Suffolk
21 September	Opening of Granta Park, TWI	Cambridge
8 October	Visit to British Steel	Llanwern, South Wales
15 November	Visit to JCB	Rocester, Staffs
21 December	Visit to Cammell Laird	Newcastle

Hollis Industries

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress there has been in his Department's inquiries into Hollis Industries. [104001]

Mr. Byers: There have been thorough inquiries in line with the Department's normal procedures in these matters.

These inquiries have now been completed and the solicitors acting for my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) have been informed that the Department does not propose to take any further action.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if supplementary evidence on the national minimum wage has been sent to the Low Pay Commission. [104065]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I can confirm that the Low Pay Commission received copies of the Supplementary Evidence on 16 December. The evidence consists of further data provided by the Inland Revenue. Copies are available in the Library of the House alongside the original Government Evidence.

Assisted Areas Map

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made in discussions with the Commission on the UK's proposals for a new assisted areas map; and what advice he can give to companies wishing to apply for regional selective assistance after 31 December. [104066]

Mr. Byers: In common with most Member States, the UK's new Assisted Areas have not yet been approved by the European Commission.

Payments of financial assistance will continue where the aid has been agreed under current arrangements before the end of December. In England, the Government Offices will, as a temporary measure, continue considering applications from companies with projects located within the new Assisted Areas map proposed in July. The Government Offices and, where appropriate, the Industrial Development Unit will undertake a full appraisal of such cases, but any offers will be conditional on confirmation from the Commission that the location is within the approved map and that the project complies with the appropriate European aid ceilings for that area. Potential applicants are strongly advised to contact the relevant Government Office before proceeding.

I understand that similar arrangements are being put in place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Post Office

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his policy is on *(a)* a sale and *(b)* an exchange of equity, relating to the Post Office. [103223]

Mr. Byers: I refer to the statement I made on the publication of the Post Office White Paper on 8 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1175–190.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what current valuation the Government places on the assets of *(a)* the Post Office, *(b)* the Royal Mail, *(c)* Post Office Counters and *(d)* Parcelforce. [103655]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The most recent information is as set out in the Post Office Report and Accounts 1998–99, a copy of which is held in the Library of the House.

Pensions (Part-time Workers)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received regarding his policy on pension entitlements for part-time workers. [101064]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has received no recent representations regarding his policy on pension entitlements for part-time workers.

Sky Television

Mr. Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the estimated cost of the Office of Fair Trading inquiry into the Sky television deal with the Premiership and Football League. [102634]

Dr. Howells: I understand from the OFT that, in the inquiry into the Sky television deal with the Premier League and the BBC, legal costs amounted to approximately £3 million and expert witness costs to about £900,000. No estimate for staff costs of the OFT has been made.

Toyota

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to the Bank of England in relation to Toyota. [103220]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* My Department routinely feeds information into the Bank of England.

Post Office Network (Benefits Payments)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the number of recipients of *(a)* family credit and *(b)* the working families tax credit who receive payment at a post office broken down to the smallest possible geographical level; and if he will estimate the value to the Post Office of that business in each case. [101609]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

People being paid Family Credit and Working Families Tax Credit by order book cash their payable orders at post offices. Between 1 October and 12 December 1999, the number of awards made which resulted in an order book being issued was as follows:

	Family credit	*WFTC*
Great Britain	18,138	294,179
Northern Ireland	1,456	12,910
Total	19,594	307,089

A further geographical breakdown is not available.

The value to the Post Office of the business this represents is commercially confidential.

DEFENCE

Royal Ordnance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made with negotiating a partnering agreement between his Department and Royal Ordnance; and if he will make a statement. [104122]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am pleased to announce that, following successful negotiations between the Ministry of Defence and BAe Systems, the Ministry of Defence intends to enter into a ten year partnering arrangement with Royal Ordnance for the supply of a wide range of ammunition products produced by Royal Ordnance Weapons and Munitions Ltd. and Royal Ordnance Radway Green. The partnering arrangement will provide Royal Ordnance with a stable work load worth some £100 million per year, and will involve the Ministry of Defence and Royal Ordnance in sharing the costs, risks and benefits over the period of the arrangement.

The agreement is the culmination of hard discussions over the last year. It represents value for money to the taxpayer, while preserving an indigenous ammunition manufacturing capability in the United Kingdom, which will enhance the future security of supply of ammunition for our armed forces. These advantages, which will be shared by both the Ministry of Defence and the company, are possible because partnering will provide Royal Ordnance with a stable basis from which it can invest, restructure, and reduce prices.

BOWMAN Project

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the BOWMAN project. [104129]

Mr. Kilfoyle: We have been reviewing the BOWMAN Tactical Communications System project. In accordance with Smart Procurement principles, it is now planned to deliver the system incrementally. As a consequence, initial deliveries of the stand-alone, Personal Role Radio element of BOWMAN should now be possible earlier than previously planned.

The MOD's preferred supplier for BOWMAN is Archer Communications Systems Ltd. (ACSL). Management of ACSL is now vested in BAe Systems who have committed to a radical reinvigoration of the company. ACSL is working under a risk of reduction contract to deliver a viable solution to the BOWMAN requirement. The company's original proposal was too expensive and carried too much risk. Since June, we have, therefore, been working with ACSL to produce an acceptable solution. This will depend in part on efficiencies being achieved by the company.

We now hope to place an implementation contract in late 2000. We cannot yet set a revised in service date, but would expect it to be in late 2003/early 2004.

Imphal Barracks

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the undertaking given by his predecessor concerning the number of civilian staff to be employed at Imphal Barracks following the transfer of the tri-Service Defence Vetting Agency to York and the removal of the 2 Division Headquarters from York to Scotland. [99469]

Mr. Spellar: In his answer of 26 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 434W, my predecessor stated that the strength of the Defence Vetting Agency would be 310 when the Agency collocates at York. The revised position is that the Agency strength immediately following collocation (in early 2001) will be 311.

Of those 311, a total of 130 will be Investigating Officers who currently work from their homes, and will continue to do so. Thus, the number of Defence Vetting Agency staff who will actually be working in Imphal Barracks immediately after collocation is 181.

The total number of civilian staff (including those of the DVA) who will be working at Imphal Barracks in early 2001 will be 430. The balance of 249 are Imphal Barracks staff, employed in various (mainly Army) units.

The Agency is introducing new vetting processes and IT systems at Imphal Barracks. It is therefore likely that the numbers of staff will vary slightly as these are tested and proved.

Equipment Costs

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of *(a)* a Hornet radar sensor and *(b)* the future anti-surface guided weapon. [103031]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 21 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the cost of a Hornet radar sensor and the Future Anti-Surface Guided Weapon. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The United Kingdom does not operate, nor has plans to procure, a sensor system called Hornet. You may be referring to the sensor system for the US F/A18 aircraft called the Hornet, but as you will appreciate, we have no visibility of the costs associated with this programme.

The requirement for the Future Anti-Surface Guided Weapon has yet to be fully defined and it is therefore too early to indicate the cost.

I am sorry that I cannot be more helpful.

Type 45 Frigate

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the estimated cost is of the Royal Navy's Type 45 frigate project; and if he will make a statement. [103057]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 21 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the estimated cost of the UK Royal Navy's Type 45 Project. This matter falls to me to answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

As I wrote in my letter to you of 15 December, the total programme cost for the 12 currently planned Type 45 warships (actually designated Destroyers rather than Frigates) including their missiles is approximately £6bn. This includes approximately £1.2bn for the development, design and build of the first of class ship and £1bn for the development and initial production of the Principal Anti Air Missile System (PAAMS). The balance of £3.8bn contains funding for further missile procurement, and allows for the incremental acquisition of the combat system. The ship design will incorporate significant growth margins to allow for this incremental capability development.

Near Miss (Edinburgh)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the near miss involving an RAF Tornado and a British Midland plane near Edinburgh Airport earlier in December. [103545]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Two aircraft proximity incidents (or airproxes) involving British Midland SAAB 340 aircraft and RAF Tornados were reported during the first week of December. One of these occurred in the Aberdeen area, the other, 12 nautical miles north east of St. Abb's Head. A further incident was reported by an Edinburgh air traffic controller and involved a Tornado and a British Airways Embraer aircraft. All these reports are being investigated through the United Kingdom Airprox Board who will publish their findings next year.

Deceased Aircrew (Gross Negligence)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the occasions between 1987 and 1993 in which deceased aircrew were found guilty of gross negligence in accidents involving military aircraft which were not fitted with cockpit voice recorders or flight data recorders. [103546]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There were none.

Centre of Defence Medicine

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what personnel he plans to be located at the Centre of Defence Medicine in Birmingham on its planned opening by April 2001; and whence they will have been transferred. [103412]

Mr. Spellar: We envisage that the Centre for Defence Medicine will have a total of around 100 military and civilian staff when it opens in April 2001, and will then grow, in agreement with University Hospital Birmingham, to meet the requirements of the Defence Medical Services. Detailed planning to ensure the appropriate provision of manpower to the Centre for Defence Medicine and other Defence Medical Services commitments is currently in hand. Military medical personnel for the Centre will be drawn from Defence Secondary Care Agency, Defence Medical Training Organisation and other formations within the Defence Medical Services.

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many chemical weapon production facilities have yet to be destroyed under the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons regulations. [103054]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

The United Kingdom abandoned its offensive chemical weapons capability in the mid-1950s. In accordance with our obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) the UK has declared to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) eight former chemical weapons production facilities. Of these facilities, four have been destroyed, one is due to be destroyed, one has been approved by the OPCW to be used for purposes not prohibited by the CWC and the remaining two are awaiting similar approval from the OPCW.

In its 1998 Annual Report, the OPCW reported that fifty-nine chemical weapons production facilities had been declared by States Parties as of 31 December 1998. All of these will have to be destroyed unless the States Parties concerned decide to seek approval to use any of the facilities for peaceful purposes under the provisions of the CWC.

Concordat (Scotland and Wales)

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will agree his concordat with the Scottish Executive and National Assembly for Wales. [102474]

Mr. Hoon *[pursuant to his reply, 9 December 1999, c. 591W]:* The agreement on the Ministry of Defence's bilateral concordat with the Welsh Assembly was not reached on 9 December as I stated. However, we have subsequently agreed the Ministry of Defence's concordat with the Cabinet of the Welsh Assembly for Wales. The Concordat sets out the principles governing the bilateral relationship between the Ministry of Defence and the Welsh Assembly. A copy of the Concordat has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

C-17s

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* geographical and *(b)* other constraints are placed on the three US Air Force C-17s which might be used by the RAF for the MOD's short-term lift requirement. [103107]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Howe, Deputy Chief Executive, on behalf of the Chief Executive, to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 21 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked what geographical, and other, constraints would be placed on the US Air Force C-17 aircraft if they were to be used by the RAF for the Short Term Strategic Airlift (STSA) requirement. This matter falls to me for answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

We are considering a number of potential solutions to meet our requirement for strategic airlift, including the Boeing C-17. Any geographical or other constraints on aircraft operation form part of the Department's assessment. I am not able to disclose the details because it would prejudice the assessment of options that is currently under way and I am therefore withholding the information under Exemption 7 (Effective management and operations of the public sector) of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Ministers aim to announce a decision on this programme in the early part of next year.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the ability to provide logistic support for the three C-17s through the US supply system. [103109]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Howe, Deputy Chief Executive, on behalf of the Chief Executive, to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 21 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked what assessment has been made of the ability to provide logistic support to the C-17 aircraft through the USA supply system. This matter falls to me for answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

We are considering a number of potential solutions to meet our requirement for strategic airlift in the short-term, including the Boeing C-17. Logistic support forms part of the Department's assessment. In the case of C-17, the assessment does include consideration of utilising the existing US supply chain. I am withholding the content of the assessment under Exemption 13 (third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information because it constitutes commercially sensitive information.

Ministers aim to announce a decision on this programme in the early part of next year.

Antonov 124–100

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* geographical and *(b)* other constraints are placed on the use of the Antonov 124–100. [103108]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Howe, Deputy Chief Executive, on behalf of the Chief Executive, to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 21 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked what geographical, and other, constraints are placed on the use of the Antonov AN 124–100. This matter falls to me for answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

We are considering a number of potential solutions to meet our requirements for strategic airlift in the short-term, including the Antonov AN 124–100. Any geographical or other constraints on aircraft operation form part of the Department's assessment. I am not able to disclose the details because it would prejudice the assessment of options that is currently under way and I am therefore withholding the information under Exemption 7 (Effective management and operations of the public sector) of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Ministers aim to announce a decision on this programme in the early part of next year.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the prospects for short-term use of the Antonov 124–100. [103105]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Howe, Deputy Chief Executive, on behalf of the Chief Executive, to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 21 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked what assessment has been made of the prospects for the short-term use of the Antonov AN 124–100. This matter falls to me for answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

We are considering a number of potential solutions to meet our requirement for strategic airlift in the short-term, including the Antonov AN 124–100. Options have been received from a number of companies and these are currently being assessed. I am therefore withholding commercially sensitive information under Exemption 13 (third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Ministers aim to announce a decision on this programme in the early part of next year.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what financial savings he has assessed can be gained on the current defence budget by the use of the Antonov 124–100 for the short-term strategic airlift role. [103106]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Howe, Deputy Chief Executive, on behalf of the Chief Executive, to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 21 December 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked what savings can be gained on the current defence budget by the use of the Antonov AN 124–100 for the Short Term Strategic Airlift role. This matter falls to me for answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

We are considering a number of potential solutions to meet our requirements for strategic airlift in the short-term, including the Antonov AN 124–100. Options have been received from a number of companies and these are currently being assessed. The costs and potential savings associated with each option are commercially sensitive and I am therefore withholding the information under Exemption 13 (third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Ministers aim to announce a decision on this programme in the early part of next year.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many times the Antonov 124–100 aircraft has been used by the MoD-RAF in the last two years. [103102]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The RAF has chartered the following Antonov 124–100s to date:

Year	*Number*
1998	16
1999	53

Correspondence

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will write to the hon. Member for Salisbury about the competition for interim strategic lift capability. [103410]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I have written to the hon. Member today and a copy of my letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102048]

Mr. Straw: The percentage of permanent staff in the Home Office, including the Prison Service, recorded as having a disability on 1 April 1999 was 0.6 per cent. More detailed figures are given in the table. Staff with disabilities in the main Home Office are no longer recorded as being "registered" or "unregistered". Information on staff with disabilities is gathered on a voluntary basis. The data include those who have indicated that they have a disability as defined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

As part of our commitment to the employment of people with disabilities, we use the Employment Service's "Two Ticks" Disability Symbol for external recruitment and for internal selection and promotion boards. We operate a Guaranteed Interview Scheme which guarantees an interview to anyone with a disability as long as they meet the minimum criteria for the post. The recruitment brochure for the Home Office includes details of the scheme. An audio version of this brochure is in preparation for applicants with sight difficulties.

The Home Office is signed up to New Deal. The Government aim to ensure that the particular needs of young people with disabilities who are claiming Job Seekers Allowance are met within the New Deal so that they are able to benefit fully from the opportunities it offers. We have been able on some occasions to offer placements to graduates with disabilities under the 'Workable' scheme. We also provide a disability assessment service for staff to establish what reasonable adjustments can be made by, for example special aids or facilities, to help them participate fully in the work of the Department.

We also take part in the Cabinet Office bursary scheme for staff with disabilities. Under this scheme, we award departmental bursaries, supported by mentoring, to those who are judged to have the potential to reach the feeder grade to the Senior Civil Service.

Area of employment [1]	*Percentage of staff employed who are record as having a disability* [2]
Home Office (core areas)	1.8
Immigration and Nationality Department	4.1
HM Prison Service	0.1
Fire Service College	0.7
Forensic Science Service	0.6
United Kingdom Passport Agency	2.5
Home Office average excluding prison service	2.6
Home Office average including prison service	0.6

[1] Information given is for 1 April 1999

[2] Percentage is of permanent non-industrial staff

Peat

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his Department's policy is on the purchase and use of peat for its own operations and activities; and what performance targets his Department has set to reduce current peat use. [103017]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office Greening Operations Policy includes a statement that slow renewables such as peat should be replaced by organic wastes such as coir, manure, leaf mould and bark. The Home Office Procurement Manual also states that peat-free composts should be used. No specific targets have been set for reducing the use of peat.

UK Passport

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce a new hardback UK passport incorporating the existing pages of national identification. [102915]

Mrs. Roche: There are no plans to introduce a new hardback United Kingdom passport. The burgundy style soft covered passport, introduced in 1988, is machine-readable and in a common format agreed in 1981 with other European Union countries. It also complies with international practice, in particular the International Standards and Recommended Practices of the International Civil Aviation Organisation Convention on International Civil Aviation. Most countries of the world produce passports with a flexible soft cover. The standard format for passports facilitates the passage of many millions of travellers worldwide, enabling speedier progress through passport controls.

Moreover, it would not now be practical to produce a hardback version of the United Kingdom passport. In 1997 the United Kingdom Passport Agency let a 10-year contract for the Security Printing and Systems Ltd. for a more secure version of the soft covered machine readable passport. It would require substantial and expensive re-engineering of the passport manufacturing process to switch to a hardback cover.

Nathan Graham

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Chief Constable of Nottingham about the circumstances, including the use of handcuffs, surrounding the death in custody of Nathan Graham. [103310]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An investigation into Mr. Graham's death is being conducted by the Governor of Her Majesty's Prison Whatton. It will cover all the relevant circumstances, and the report will be made available to Mr. Graham's family. A separate investigation is being carried out by Nottinghamshire Police at the request of Her Majesty's Coroner.

Confiscated Assets

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the value of confiscated assets of convicted criminals in each of the last three years. [103170]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is given in the table.

The value [1] of new confiscation orders made by type of offence, England and Wales

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99 [2]*
Drug offences	131,410,000	15,010,000	22,264,000
Other criminal offences	6,070,000	17,199,000	12,683,000
Total	19,211,000	32,209,000	34,947,000

[1] Taking from the annual Home Office data collection Receipts from Confiscation orders

[2] Provisional

Prostitution

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women were convicted of soliciting for prostitution in the Greater London area in each month from January to November. [103172]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information, which is provisional, is given in the table.

Number of females convicted for loitering or soliciting for the purposes of prostitution [1] within the Metropolitan Police area (including City of London) by month (January to June), 1999 [2]

	Convictions
January	192
February	178
March	206
April	154
May	155
June	137

[1] An offence under S1 Street Offences Act 1959

[2] Provisional

Rape/Sexual Assault

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will assess the benefits of changing the definition of unreasonable belief in relation to *(a)* rape and *(b)* sexual assault; [103314]

(2) what plans he has to introduce a new charge of assault in the course of sexual intercourse; [103343]

(3) what plans he has to propose amendments to the law to redefine unreasonable belief in relation to rape and sexual assault; [103341]

(4) if he will bring forward amendments to the law to re-define *(a)* consent and *(b)* coercion in relation to rape; [103319]

(5) if he will assess the benefits of introducing a new legal definition of rape; [103313]

(6) what plans he has to review the legal definition of rape. [103318]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The sex offences review is currently considering the law relating to rape and sexual assault as part of its remit to review sex offences. All of the issues mentioned form part of their consideration. The review is required to recommend clear and coherent new offences which protect the individual, especially children and the more vulnerable, from abuse and exploitation, enable abusers to be appropriately punished and be fair and non-discriminatory. I expect the review to report in the spring, and that its proposals will be published for consultation shortly after.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to place individuals on the Sexual Offenders Register who are found guilty of committing an assault in the course of sexual intercourse. [103344]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is at present no such offence. Anyone found guilty of rape is required to notify the police of their name and address and any changes of name and address. The review of sex offences has been asked to review the law and to recommend clear and coherent offences to protect victims. A number of

proposals for change have been made, including one for an offence of an assault in the course of sexual intercourse by the Soroptimist International's United Kingdom Programme Action Committee's Working Party on Rape. When the review has completed its consideration of the law, it will also recommend which of the offences it proposes should carry the registration requirement under the Sex Offenders Act 1997.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department has taken in response to the interim report, "The Processing of Rape Cases by the Criminal Justice System". [103320]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The interim report on the study on the attrition in rape cases was followed by the final report of the study, "A Question of Evidence? Investigating and prosecuting rape in the 1990s", which was published on 1 July 1999. The recommendations of the report have contributed to the work of the sex offences review which is looking at the definition of rape and consent, and the "Speaking Up For Justice" programme to improve the treatment of vulnerable or intimidated witnesses.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many sentences imposed on those who commit rape and crimes involving sexual abuse were conditional on the perpetrator participating in programmes for positive change in the last year for which figures are available. [103316]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not held on the Home Office Court Proceedings Database.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent reports he has received on the *(a)* psychological and *(b)* physical impact of rape on its victims. [103317]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have recently received a copy of the report of the Working Party on Rape of Soroptomist International. The review of sex offences has also received this report, in addition to 38 submissions from both individuals and organisations which relate to the law on rape including the psychological and physical impact of rape on victims.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were *(a)* arrested for *(b)* charged with and *(c)* convicted of rape in each police authority area broken down by (i) age group and (ii) socio-economic class for each year since 1995. [103311]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Detailed information on the number of people arrested is not collected centrally.

Information given in the table, taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, shows the number of prosecutions and convictions for rape offences. The Database does not hold information on the socio-economic class of defendants.

Table A: Number of defendants prosecuted at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences of rape [1] by age-group and police force area, 1995

	Prosecutions				*Convictions*			
	10–17	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*	*10–17*	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*
Avon and Somerset	4	3	35	42	1	0	14	15
Bedfordshire	0	1	17	18	0	0	5	5
Cambridgeshire	1	3	16	20	0	1	11	12
Cheshire	2	1	12	15	2	0	8	10
Cleveland	1	1	12	14	2	2	6	10
Cumbria	3	3	18	24	1	0	6	7
Derbyshire	2	3	25	30	1	1	14	16
Devon and Cornwall	4	2	23	29	2	0	10	12
Dorset	0	1	15	16	0	0	3	3
Durham	1	1	18	20	1	1	10	12
Essex	1	1	33	35	0	1	9	10
Gloucestershire	3	1	6	10	1	0	4	5
Greater Manchester	10	8	106	124	2	2	44	48
Hampshire	6	3	33	42	0	0	10	10
Hertfordshire	2	1	15	18	0	0	4	4
Humberside	1	2	15	18	1	0	10	11
Kent	3	4	24	31	2	0	17	19
Lancashire	5	3	24	32	1	1	14	16
Leicestershire	3	4	27	34	1	0	3	4
Lincolnshire	0	1	22	23	0	1	0	1
Merseyside	4	3	53	60	2	1	12	15
Metropolitan Police[2]	22	18	253	253	10	10	79	99
Norfolk	0	0	12	12	1	0	3	4
North Yorkshire	1	0	13	14	0	0	8	8
Northamptonshire	1	0	16	17	0	0	6	6
Northumbria	2	9	52	63	3	1	20	24
Nottinghamshire	0	3	45	48	0	0	7	7
South Yorkshire	3	3	32	38	1	0	12	13
Staffordshire	4	5	26	35	4	1	2	7
Suffolk	1	0	11	12	0	1	6	7
Surrey	1	0	9	10	0	0	4	4
Sussex	4	1	28	33	0	1	5	6

Table A: Number of defendants prosecuted at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences of rape [1] by age-group and police force area, 1995

	Prosecutions				Convictions			
	10–17	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*	*10–17*	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*
Thames Valley	2	6	39	47	0	0	5	5
Warwickshire	0	0	10	10	1	0	1	2
West Mercia	3	0	21	24	0	1	4	5
West Midlands	7	9	88	104	3	6	26	35
West Yorkshire	13	8	66	87	2	1	27	30
Wiltshire	1	2	19	22	1	0	8	9
Dyfed Powys	1	0	7	8	0	0	4	4
Gwent	3	1	12	16	0	0	1	1
North Wales	1	1	22	24	0	0	13	13
South Wales	5	4	54	63	1	0	34	35
England and Wales	131	120	1,384	1,635	47	33	489	569

[1] Includes rape, attempted rape and offences under the Mental Health Act 1959
[2] Including City of London

Table B: Number of defendants prosecuted at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences of rape [1] by age-group and police force area, 1996

	Prosecutions				Convictions			
	10–17	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*	*10–17*	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*
Avon and Somerset	6	6	40	52	0	0	7	7
Bedfordshire	2	0	23	25	0	1	6	7
Cambridgeshire	1	2	27	30	1	0	5	6
Cheshire	3	0	22	25	1	1	8	10
Cleveland	0	2	13	15	0	1	8	9
Cumbria	0	1	11	12	1	0	4	5
Derbyshire	3	1	25	29	2	1	9	12
Devon and Cornwall	1	1	26	28	1	1	13	15
Dorset	0	1	16	17	0	0	7	7
Durham	2	1	10	13	0	0	5	5
Essex	2	1	38	41	0	1	10	11
Gloucestershire	2	1	11	14	0	0	2	2
Greater Manchester	9	10	108	127	5	2	26	33
Hampshire	2	4	45	51	1	0	7	8
Hertfordshire	1	0	14	15	0	0	8	8
Humberside	1	1	21	23	2	0	11	13
Kent	1	0	22	23	0	0	15	15
Lancashire	3	4	42	49	0	1	12	13
Leicestershire	2	2	35	39	0	1	8	9
Lincolnshire	2	0	9	11	0	0	4	4
Merseyside	2	6	40	48	1	1	15	17
Metropolitan Police[2]	29	22	287	338	4	0	92	116
Norfolk	2	0	9	11	0	0	1	1
North Yorkshire	6	4	24	34	2	0	6	7
Northamptonshire	0	1	8	9	0	0	2	2
Northumbria	11	10	62	83	2	1	22	25
Nottinghamshire	1	3	31	35	1	1	12	14
South Yorkshire	2	3	40	45	2	0	8	10
Staffordshire	3	3	38	44	1	1	10	12
Suffolk	0	0	14	14	0	0	3	3
Surrey	0	4	9	13	0	0	5	5
Sussex	1	4	22	27	1	0	8	9
Thames Valley	2	4	49	55	3	0	13	16
Warwickshire	1	0	5	6	1	0	4	5
West Mercia	3	3	12	18	0	0	8	8
West Midlands	6	9	81	96	4	3	31	38
West Yorkshire	13	1	80	94	2	4	31	37
Wiltshire	0	0	18	18	0	1	6	7
Dyfed Powys	1	0	11	12	1	0	3	4
Gwent	3	1	28	32	0	1	8	9
North Wales	1	0	26	27	1	0	6	7
South Wales	5	5	49	59	4	0	20	24
England and Wales	135	121	1,501	1,757	54	33	489	576

[1] Includes rape, attempted rape and offences under the Mental Health Act 1959
[2] Including City of London

Table C: Number of defendants prosecuted at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences of rape [1] by age-group and police force area, 1997

	Prosecutions				Convictions			
	10–17	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*	*10–17*	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*
Avon and Somerset	4	6	61	71	0	0	10	10
Bedfordshire	2	2	21	25	0	0	6	6
Cambridgeshire	0	0	20	20	1	0	5	6
Cheshire	1	1	23	25	2	0	10	12
Cleveland	1	0	12	13	1	0	6	7
Cumbria	0	1	11	12	0	0	0	0
Derbyshire	4	3	30	37	0	0	9	9
Devon and Cornwall	5	1	46	52	4	0	10	14
Dorset	2	1	25	28	0	0	5	5
Durham	1	1	15	17	0	0	8	8
Essex	4	3	42	49	1	2	18	21
Gloucestershire	0	0	10	10	1	0	1	2
Greater Manchester	12	13	133	158	2	3	25	30
Hampshire	4	3	65	72	3	2	23	28
Hertfordshire	3	3	23	29	0	3	10	13
Humberside	0	2	15	17	0	2	9	11
Kent	3	2	27	32	0	2	14	16
Lancashire	1	8	64	73	2	1	11	14
Leicestershire	6	6	36	48	0	1	10	11
Lincolnshire	4	2	21	27	1	0	7	8
Merseyside	1	0	20	21	2	1	14	17
Metropolitan Police[2]	16	29	272	317	6	8	92	116
Norfolk	1	2	16	19	0	0	2	2
North Yorkshire	1	1	14	16	0	0	4	4
Northamptonshire	1	0	3	4	0	0	4	4
Northumbria	13	5	74	92	7	1	18	26
Nottinghamshire	2	4	55	61	0	2	12	14
South Yorkshire	2	4	40	46	4	0	13	17
Staffordshire	5	3	34	42	0	1	12	13
Suffolk	1	1	17	19	1	0	5	6
Surrey	0	1	11	12	0	1	2	3
Sussex	0	0	20	20	0	0	15	15
Thames Valley	0	9	55	64	1	2	13	16
Warwickshire	1	0	5	6	1	0	0	1
West Mercia	2	0	28	30	1	1	11	13
West Midlands	11	8	89	108	5	5	28	38
West Yorkshire	15	5	70	90	1	0	25	26
Wiltshire	0	1	23	24	0	0	3	3
Dyfed Powys	1	1	21	23	0	0	7	7
Gwent	2	6	29	37	0	1	12	13
North Wales	1	2	28	31	1	0	7	8
South Wales	1	5	58	64	1	3	21	25
England and Wales	134	145	1,682	1,961	59	42	517	618

[1] Includes rape, attempted rape and offences under the Mental Health Act 1959
[2] Including City of London

Table D: Number of defendants prosecuted at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences of rape [1] by age-group and police force area, 1998

	Prosecutions				Convictions			
	10–17	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*	*10–17*	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*
Avon and Somerset	7	3	66	76	0	1	14	15
Bedfordshire	5	1	22	28	0	0	5	5
Cambridgeshire	4	1	14	19	0	0	3	3
Cheshire	0	0	32	32	1	0	11	12
Cleveland	1	1	18	20	0	0	5	5
Cumbria	1	0	10	11	0	0	5	5
Derbyshire	2	5	30	37	0	0	7	7
Devon and Cornwall	4	4	32	40	1	2	20	23
Dorset	0	0	18	18	0	0	4	4
Durham	2	2	24	28	0	1	8	9
Essex	8	3	52	63	0	0	14	14
Gloucestershire	1	1	10	12	0	0	2	2
Greater Manchester	7	16	128	151	2	4	48	54
Hampshire	4	2	66	72	1	2	20	23
Hertfordshire	1	0	20	21	0	0	8	8

Table D: Number of defendants prosecuted at the magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences of rape [1] by age-group and police force area, 1998

	Prosecutions				Convictions			
	10–17	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*	*10–17*	*18–20*	*21+*	*Total All ages*
Humberside	0	1	24	25	0	1	7	8
Kent	2	4	41	47	0	0	11	11
Lancashire	14	7	43	64	0	1	19	20
Leicestershire	1	3	40	44	0	2	16	18
Lincolnshire	3	3	21	27	0	1	7	8
Merseyside	2	5	52	59	1	1	18	20
Metropolitan Police[2]	25	33	272	330	7	6	98	111
Norfolk	0	0	21	21	0	0	4	4
North Yorkshire	1	1	13	15	2	0	6	8
Northamptonshire	1	1	12	14	0	0	5	5
Northumbria	11	12	116	139	3	0	20	23
Nottinghamshire	4	2	53	59	0	0	19	19
South Yorkshire	2	3	33	38	2	2	9	13
Staffordshire	5	1	28	34	0	0	11	11
Suffolk	0	1	27	28	0	1	6	7
Surrey	0	1	15	16	0	0	4	4
Sussex	1	6	38	45	0	1	14	15
Thames Valley	3	5	45	53	0	1	8	9
Warwickshire	3	0	6	9	1	0	2	3
West Mercia	3	2	30	35	1	1	10	12
West Midlands	14	15	122	151	5	7	39	51
West Yorkshire	10	6	89	105	5	2	41	48
Wiltshire	1	3	22	26	0	0	3	3
Dyfed Powys	3	1	12	16	0	0	4	4
Gwent	5	5	27	37	0	0	4	4
North Wales	2	1	30	33	1	0	10	11
South Wales	8	5	74	87	3	2	31	36
England and Wales	171	166	1,848	2,185	36	39	600	675

[1] Includes rape, attempted rape and offences under the Mental Health Act 1959
[2] Including City of London

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what training programmes he has developed to enable the relevant authorities to support victims of sexual abuse and rape. [103321]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The deployment and training of police officers is an operational matter for the chief officer of each force. But it is recognised that victims of sexual abuse and rape need to be treated with special care, and officers chosen to support them have appropriate training and experience.

Experienced Victim Support volunteers receive additional training to enable them to provide the kind of specialised help required by victims of sexual abuse and rape, both at the time the offence is reported and subsequently.

Victim Support Budget

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the budget allocation for victim support in each year since 1995 per head of population in England. [103346]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Home Office grant to Victim Support is provided to deliver services to victims of crime and witnesses across England and Wales. An estimate of the grant allocation to Victim Support per head of population in England and Wales, since 1995, is given in the table.

Year	*Total grant (£ million)*	*Population of England and Wales* [1]	*Grant per head of population (£)*
1995–96	10.8	51,820,000	0.21
1996–97	11.7	52,010,000	0.22
1997–98	12.7	52,211,000	0.24
1998–99	12.7	52,428,000	0.24
1999–2000	17.3	52,428,000	0.33

[1] Source of population data: Population Trends (autumn 1999), published by the Office for National Statistics

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what budget has been allocated to victim support each year since 1995 per police authority. [103315]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Home Office grant to Victim Support is allocated by the Local Funding Panel, a sub-committee of the organisation's National Council. Victim Support advise that they are unable, at present, to provide a breakdown of grant allocation by police authority area.

Domestic Violence

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will record separately the incidence of sexual assault in cases of domestic assault. [103312]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of domestic assaults is not recorded centrally, as the statistical systems do not record the relationship between

the victim and assailant. Improvements to these systems are in hand. This will, in due course, allow better estimates of domestic assault and may allow different components of a main offence to be classified.

The 1996 British Crime Survey collected information on the prevalence of domestic violence via a computerised self-completion questionnaire. Sexual assault was one component.

Twenty-three per cent. of women aged 16 to 59 reported that they had experienced domestic assault at some time in their lives. Among the women who had been assaulted the percentage who had been forced to have sex at the last assault was eight per cent.

Police Duties (Millennium)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many additional Metropolitan Police officers will be on duty on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day; and if he will make a statement. [103327]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that approximately 11,800 police officers will be on duty on New Year's Eve and approximately 10,300 on New Year's Day. Comparable information for last year was not collected centrally.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the estimated additional cost to police forces for policing duties during the millennium celebrations; what additional funding has been allocated to police forces for the millennium period; and if he will make a statement. [103326]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The police service in England and Wales has estimated that the costs of policing the millennium celebrations could be £33 million out of total annual expenditure of over £7 billion. Police authorities are expected to meet this one-off additional expenditure item from within existing budgets and contingency reserves. Police budgets will increase on average by 3.1 per cent. this year. Police authorities will be able to increase their spending power by achieving the 2 per cent. efficiency target that has been set. In cash terms, this represents efficiency gains of around £140 million.

Police Administrative Work

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what changes have been made since May 1997 to reduce the amount of administrative work undertaken by police officers; and if he will make a statement; [103325]

(2) what is the estimated proportion of a police officer's working day which is spent on administrative duties; and if he will make a statement. [103324]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The deployment of police officers is the operational responsibility of Chief Constables. Information on the tasks undertaken by police officers during the course of their working day is not held centrally.

For measures to reduce administrative burdens I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 377W.

Prison Overcrowding

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the funding which will be required in order to remove overcrowding in prisons over the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [103335]

Mr. Boateng: It is estimated that to avoid overcrowding would require an additional 6,000 places. If provided through new privately financed prisons the annual cost would be around £195 million.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those Prison Service establishments which are overcrowded and the level of overcrowding in each case; and if he will make a statement. [103334]

Mr. Boateng: Prison Service establishments which are overcrowded and the level of overcrowding are listed in the table, based on the definition of overcrowding as being the number of prisoners above the in-use certified normal accommodation (CNA) of the establishment. In-use CNA is the baseline CNA minus places temporarily unavailable, such as damaged cells or those being refurbished. The data are for the month of November and are provisional.

Overcrowding by prison—November 1999

Prison name	*In use CNA*	*Population*	*Number of prisoners overcrowded*
Albany	436	437	1
Altcourse	612	853	241
Bedford	352	378	26
Birmingham	734	1,105	371
Blakehurst	647	843	196
Blundeston	364	372	8
Brinsford	477	509	32
Bristol	487	544	57
Brixton	693	729	36
Buckley Hall	350	386	36
Bullingdon	767	863	96
Camp Hill	394	476	82
Canterbury	196	283	87
Cardiff	525	580	55
Channings Wood	482	581	99
Cookham Wood	120	152	32
Doncaster	771	1,110	339
Dorchester	164	221	57
Downview	327	341	14
Durham	670	911	241
Eastwood Park	295	304	9
Elmley	763	917	154
Everthorpe	438	468	30
Exeter	321	468	147
Feltham	802	816	14
Garth	633	651	18
Glen Parva	678	847	169
Gloucester	235	281	46
Guys Marsh	487	518	31
Highdown	649	699	50
Lancaster Farms	496	504	8
Leeds	786	1,266	480
Leicester	219	357	138
Lincoln	360	480	120
Littlehey	624	632	8
Liverpool	1,216	1,497	281
Low Newton	142	156	14
Lowdham Grange	504	524	20
Maidstone	549	556	7
Manchester	953	1,158	205

Overcrowding by prison—November 1999

Prison name	*In use CNA*	*Population*	*Number of prisoners overcrowded*
Moorland	740	775	35
New Hall	327	376	49
Northallerton	152	261	109
Norwich	564	673	109
Parc	800	833	33
Pentonville	897	1,103	206
Portland	516	558	42
Preston	398	673	275
Ranby	710	739	29
Reading	203	219	16
Shepton Mallet	159	196	37
Shrewsbury	323	338	15
Stocken	556	577	21
Styal	412	451	39
Swansea	251	298	47
Swinfen Hall	255	300	45
Usk	251	300	49
Verne	552	570	18
Wandsworth	1,102	1,339	237
Winchester	463	598	135
Wolds	360	403	43
Woodhill	672	691	19

Projected Prison Population

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the Prison Service projections for the level of the prison population in each of the next five years; what is his estimate of the consequence for the level of prison service funding of the projections; and if he will make a statement. [103336]

Mr. Boateng: New short-term prison population projections as at October 1999, and revised long-term projections have been prepared by the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. A summary is included in the September prison population brief available on the Home Office website http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm.

The projections for the next five years are given in the table.

The Prison Service plans to increase capacity from 67,800 in 1998–99 to 71,400 in 2001–02, the third year of the comprehensive spending review settlement, and expects to have sufficient capacity to manage the central variant projection over this period.

We are considering the implications for the longer term or if the higher variant projection occurs. It is too soon to say what the consequences for funding might be but the Prison Service budget for 2002–03 and 2003–04 will be determined in the next spending review.

Projected average prison population for 1999–2000 to 2004–05

	Variants		
	Low	*Central*	*Upper*
1999–2000	65,200	65,300	65,400
2000–01	66,800	68,100	68,900
2001–02	68,200	70,100	71,900
2002–03	68,300	70,800	73,000
2003–04	68,600	71,300	74,000
2004–05	68,900	71,900	75,600

Police Headgear

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Association of Chief Police Officers concerning the adequacy of the traditional policeman's helmet as protective headgear. [103175]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A Home Office Minister met a representative of the Association of Chief Police Officers' Uniform Project Group in October 1998. That project has been looking at the design of the police uniform, including headgear, to ensure that it is fit for purpose and affords adequate protection to the officer. The Police Scientific Development Branch of the Home Office is involved in this continuing work.

Income Tax (Guernsey) Law 1975

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy on the *(a)* repeal and *(b)* amendment of section 201 of the Income Tax (Guernsey) Law 1975; and what representations he has received from the States of Guernsey on the repeal and amendment of the section. [103137]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that the Guernsey authorities do not at present propose to repeal or amend section 201 of the Income Tax (Guernsey) Law 1975. I have received no representations on the matter from the States of Guernsey.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the *(a)* repeal and *(b)* amendment of section 201 of the Income Tax (Guernsey) Law 1975. [103136]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My officials have had correspondence and discussions with Guernsey officials about this matter.

Case Outcomes

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for each of the years 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998, what percentage of defendants appearing before magistrates' courts were found guilty, having pleaded not guilty. [101943]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Home Office Court Proceedings Database does not contain details of defendant plea in the magistrates' courts.

However, I understand from the Attorney-General's Office that, in respect of proceedings handled by the Crown Prosecution Service, the proportion of convictions in contested hearings was as follows:

	Percentage
1995	77.3
1996	75.7
1997	74.4
1998	73.7

Convictions following guilty pleas fell within this period because an increasing number of cases were proved in absence of the defendant rather than proceeding to a contested hearing. Proofs in absence rose from 92,251 in 1995 to 114,133 in 1998, an increase of 23.7 per cent.

Sayyad Boland

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date exceptional leave to remain was withdrawn, and when he expects a final decision to be taken, in the case of Sayyad Ali Ghamety Boland. [102775]

Mrs. Roche: Our detailed records relating to individual overseas nationals are confidential and not particularly disclosable. A final decision has now been taken and the applicant will be informed shortly.

Paedophiles

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for the last available 12 months for which figures are available, what percentage of the victims of convicted paedophiles in England and Wales were infant girls. [103384]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not held on the Home Office Court Proceedings Database.

Gaming

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 534W, on Gaming, if he will make a statement on the composition of the Independent Review Body he intends to establish to review and advise on the law on gaming. [103867]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The members of the review body will bring a wide range of relevant expertise to bear, including business, law, accountancy, psychology and law enforcement. I shall announce the names of the Chairman and members as soon as possible.

Mothers and Infants (Prisons)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the action plan in response to the review on mothers and babies and children in prison. [104125]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service announced earlier this year that it would publish an action plan setting out how it intended to respond to the 62 recommendations made in the 'Report of a Review of Principles, Policies and Procedures on Mothers and Babies/Children in Prison'. This has now been completed and I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Library.

I am pleased to say that the Service has accepted the majority of the recommendations in full. This will mean new procedures governing admission to the units and published standards for their management. More importantly, the Director General has reinforced his acceptance that the overriding principle guiding the provision and allocation of places in mother and baby units should be in the best interests of the child.

I am grateful to the members of the working group who prepared the report, particularly those from outside the Service. Their expertise, and the commitment from the Prison Service to implement the recommendations will help ensure that the needs of children and mothers in custody are met.

Sex and Drugs Markets

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to publish his Department's research on sex and drug markets. [104126]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office Policing and Reducing Crime Unit (PRCU) commissioned researchers at South Bank University to examine the links between sex and drug markets. The report "Street Business: the links between sex and drug markets" (Police Research Series No. 118) is published today and a copy has been placed in the Library.

The report findings will be considered carefully by the Government. However, the report is not a statement of Home Office policy or intention in this area.

Metropolitan Police (C3i) Project

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if bidders for the Metropolitan Police Command, Control, Communications and Information (C3i) project will be reimbursed their bid costs if the project is terminated. [104127]

Mr. Straw: With my agreement, the Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District is prepared to reimburse the C3i bidders some of their bid costs solely in the event of cancellation by the Metropolitan Police Authority resulting from a change in policy following transition to the Metropolitan Police Authority. The bidders will be expected to continue to bear the normal commercial risks and costs associated with failing to secure a contract.

Sex Offenders

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many sex offenders have registered under the Sex Offenders Act 1997 to date; and if he will make a statement. [104128]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are now over 10,000 sex offenders registered in England and Wales. This represents a compliance rate of 97 per cent. This compliance rate refers to the number of offenders who have registered their names and addresses with the police. There has been a steady improvement in compliance rates for registration from around 70 per cent. when the Act first came into force in September 1997. This is due to a large extent to the active approach adopted by the police in enforcing the registration system and following up those who have failed to register. The police are working with the Home Office to look at how compliance rates can be improved further.

Neighbourhood Warden Schemes

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the current operation and effectiveness of neighbourhood warden schemes; and if he will make a statement. [103648]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The report of the Policy Action Team on Neighbourhood Wardens will be published in the New Year. My foreword to this report will outline in full the Government's response to its recommendations, including those relating to the current operation and effectiveness of neighbourhood warden schemes.

Family Court Welfare Officers

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance is given to family court welfare officers; and if he will make a statement. [103245]

Mr. Boateng: Family Court Welfare officers are expected to comply with the National Standards for Probation Service Family Court Welfare work, published in 1994. The Standards, which set out basic standards of good practice, are issued in consultation with the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Department of Health and the Wales Office. Probation Services should ensure that local procedures are instituted to monitor whether the standards are being achieved. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation inspect service performance against the standards.

Court welfare officers must ensure that their work is free from improper discrimination on any ground; chapter one of the standards includes guidance on equal opportunities.

In addition, an induction manual produced by the Association of Chief Officers of Probation is given to members of staff on appointment as family court officers and is supported by a National Induction programme and two training resource packs, one of which includes an anti-discriminatory trigger training video.

A copy of the National Standards has been placed in the Library of the House.

Racial Equality

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to promote racial equality. [103246]

Mr. Boateng: We have introduced a Bill to extend further the Race Relations Act 1976 in relation to public authorities and to make chief officers of police vicariously liable for acts of racial discrimination by their police officers; we have responded positively to proposals made by the Commission for Racial Equality and the Better Regulation Task Force to amend the Race Relations Act 1976 and other anti-discrimination legislation; we are implementing an Action Plan published in response to the 70 recommendations made in the report on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry; targets have been set for the recruitment, retention and career progression of ethnic minority staff in the Home Office and the fire, prison, police, probation and immigration services; and we are currently developing a basket of performance indicators which will be designed to measure improvements in race equality across a range of key public services.

We have also published an equality statement that sets race equality within a wider strategy to ensure that the public sector promotes equality and leads by example.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce measures to enable group complaints to be made to courts in racial discrimination cases. [103247]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Lord Chancellor's Department (LCD), which has responsibility for the courts, is currently reviewing the position of group and representative actions to the courts in England and Wales. The Commission for Racial Equality proposed, in its Third Review of the Race Relations Act 1976, published in April 1998, that the Act be amended to enable a court (or tribunal) to consider a complaint where racial discrimination affects a number of people who wish to bring a group complaint, without the need for each person separately to bring proceedings. The Commission's recommendation is being taken into account as part of the LCD's review. The LCD will be undertaking a public consultation on the Government's proposals early in 2000.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the number and value of contracts let by his Department since May 1997 to external consultants and advisers for the management of competitive tendering processes. [103609]

Mr. Straw: Details available of the number and value of contracts let by my Department since May 1997 to external consultants and advisers for the management of competitive tendering processes is given in the table.

Year	*Number of contracts*	*Value*
May 1997 to March 1998	1	549,376
April 1999 to March 1999	1	910,261
April 1999 to date	2	125,000
Total	4	1,584,637

Driving Offences

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Salisbury of 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 500W, on driving offences, if he will list, using common names, the drugs found in the blood samples analysed by the Forensic Science Service. [103404]

Mr. Charles Clarke: According to the Forensic Science Service, the drugs found in the blood samples analysed by them in England and Wales in 1998–99 were Amphetamines (including Methyl Amphetamines and Ecstasy), Cannabis, Cocaine, Opiates, Methadone, Benzodiazepines (mainly Diazepam and Temazepam) and "other" drugs.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Torbay of 1 October 1999 regarding Dr. Charl Malherbe and his application for residency on 9 September. [103656]

Mrs. Roche: I am very sorry that the hon. Member has not received a reply. I will write to him early in the New Year.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Stephen and Julia Bowles

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will appeal against the sentence passed on 10 December by Judge Hyam in relation to the conviction of Stephen and Julia Bowles for corporate manslaughter; and if he will make a statement. [103544]

The Solicitor-General: I have asked the Crown Prosecution Service to gather the necessary case papers so that either I or the Attorney-General can consider whether this is a case which should be referred to the Court of Appeal on the basis that the sentence passed was unduly lenient.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Computers (Millennium)

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the President of the Council what actions she is taking to deal with the possibility of attacks of *(a)* viruses, *(b)* trojans and *(c)* worms on networked computer systems over the new year 2000 period. [100405]

Mrs. Beckett: Government Departments and private sector organisations owning computer systems of critical importance to the national infrastructure receive, as a matter of course, advice and guidance on preventing and handling computer security incidents, including virus attacks. To guard against any extra risk that might arise over the Millennium period, they have also been issued with specific guidance on precautionary measures and how to deal with a suspected attack during this time. The Government's Unified Incident Reporting and Alert Scheme, UNIRAS, will be on call throughout the Millennium period to give owners of critical systems emergency advice.

For other organisations and the general public, advice on computer security and viruses is available from various sources including recognised computer security organisations, computer hardware and software manufacturers and, in particular, anti-virus software vendors.

Private Members' Bills

Mr. Cox: To ask the President of the Council if she will put forward proposals for reform of the procedures for dealing with Private Members' Bills. [103173]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no immediate plans to do so, though these matters are kept under review.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Adjournment of the House

Mr. Lidington: To ask the President of the Council what plans she has for the House to adjourn during February 2000. [101205]

Mrs. Beckett: I shall announce the dates of any future recesses as soon as I am in a position to do so, which, as always, are dependant on the progress of business.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kosovo

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has undertaken of the amount of humanitarian relief provided to shelter those Kosovars whose homes have been destroyed or damaged; and if all the shelter requirements for Kosovars this winter have been met. [103595]

Clare Short: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is responsible for co-ordinating the international humanitarian effort to support the people of Kosovo through the winter. Their view is that the effort to provide winter accommodation for those who need it is well on target. About 90 per cent. of the planned distribution of emergency repair kits has been completed by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and the Office for Disaster Assistance/USAID. The agencies are also distributing firewood, stoves and additional roofing repair and insulating material. UNHCR have identified 19,800 places in community shelter to supplement the accommodation available with 40,000 host families. These measures, together with the provision of winterised tents and prefabricated shelters in some areas, should cover needs.

Street Children

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development in which countries her Department is working on projects for the benefit of street children. [103730]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development (DFID) supports work in many countries which benefits the lives of street children, either strategically or through targeted interventions. This includes work in Brazil, Ecuador, Kenya, India, South Africa, Bangladesh, and Mozambique.

The reality is that children cannot be separated from the wider communities in which they live. Projects that seek to supply services to children which are not part of a wider effort to improve economic development or the provision of basic services will not generate sustainable development and real improvements in the life of children. Street children in many countries benefit from

our programmes for primary education and the elimination of child labour, either channelled bilaterally or through support for, for example, the united Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the ILO's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour.

Iran

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received on women's human rights in Iran; and if she will make a statement. [103746]

Clare Short: I have received no recent representations on women's rights in Iran.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102379]

Mr. Robin Cook: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

General Affairs Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the outcome of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 6 and 7 December; and if he will make a statement. [102349]

Mr. Vaz: 1. The General Affairs Council on 6 and 7 December adopted 25 A points and noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its sessions of 3–4 November (listed in document no 12476/99) and 15–19 November (listed in document no 12791/99). Copies of the documents listing the A points and the resolutions will be placed in the House Libraries.

European Defence Policy

2. The Council agreed two reports by the Presidency for the Helsinki European Council on military and non-military crisis management, as the basis for further work leading to final decisions at the end of 2000. They build on agreement at the Cologne European Council, providing a strong focus on improving capabilities, making clear that the EU will act where the Alliance as a whole is not engaged, providing a solid basis for further development of EU-NATO relations and the involvement of non-EU European NATO Allies; and setting up interim arrangements to take forward detailed work on implementation.

Common Strategies

3. The Council agreed an EU Common Strategy on Ukraine, to be put to Heads of Government at the Helsinki European Council for adoption. It also took note of a Presidency report to the Helsinki European Council on the implementation of the Russia Common Strategy.

Enlargement

4. The Council had a wide-ranging discussion of enlargement in preparation for the Helsinki European Council. There was wide consensus that the EU should:

invite all six further countries (Malta, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania) to open negotiations next year;

enhance the principle of "differentiation" within negotiations, so that the best prepared candidates can make progress as fast as they can, based on merit;

maintain the momentum of progress with countries already negotiating (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Cyprus and Estonia), by opening all remaining chapters in negotiations as early as possible in 2000;

have the institutional reforms necessary for enlargement in place in 2002.

5. Ministers also discussed ideas for the development of EU/Turkey relations.

IGC

6. The Presidency set out the main elements of its preparatory report on the IGC.

Council Reform

7. The Council took note of the Presidency's draft report on reform of the Council of Ministers.

Negotiations on a Development Partnership with ACPs

8. The Council agreed that the volume of the ninth European Development Fund would increase to 13.8 billion Euros, shared among member states on the same basis as for the eighth Fund.

Draft Statute for MEPs

9. The Presidency reported to the Council that negotiations on a Statute for MEPs were moving slowly.

European Parliament Electoral Procedure

10. The Council discussed Common Electoral Principles. No agreement was reached on outstanding issues, notably the enfranchisement of Gibraltar, on which the UK made it clear its intention to comply with the European Court of Human Rights Ruling of 18 February 1999. Other outstanding issues are dates for the next European elections, and provisions to rule out dual mandates in member states.

Chechnya

11. The Council reiterated its deep concern over the intensifying military campaign in Chechnya, in particular the threat to citizens of Grozny. It urged the Russian Government to refrain from using excessive force and to respect the principles of international law.

12. The Council welcomed the Istanbul Summit Declaration. It expected that the Russian Federation would honour fully its commitments there. The Council looked forward to the visit to the region by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on 14–15 December. It recalled that a political solution was essential and that the OSCE could contribute to that goal. Ministers urged that a dialogue be established with the elected leaders of the North Caucasus, including Chechnya. The Council called upon the Russian government to provide security for humanitarian aid operations os that international aid agencies could help victims of the war.

Western Balkans

13. The Council decided to intensify co-operation with democratic forces in the FRY, including trilateral meetings involving the United States and in the form of task forces or other consultative mechanisms. The Union

resolved to maintain or strengthen the sanctions targeted at the regime, while keeping the issue of sanctions under review; and to support measures aimed at alleviating the situation of the people of the FRY. The Council demanded that the blocked oil deliveries be allowed to go through, and denounced the Yugoslav authorities for imposing further suffering on the population. The Council recalled that, while legal responsibility lies with the FRY, it was prepared to examine a possible EU contribution to clearing the Danube on the basis of a concrete proposal by the Danube Commission and an analysis by the European Commission. An extension of the Visa Ban List was agreed.

14. The Council anticipated an early assessment by the Commission of the situation in Montenegro and invited the Commission to submit concrete proposals as soon as possible to meet Montenegro's needs. The Council also welcomed the intention of the Commission to include the fight against organised crime in Kosovo in its year 2000 assistance programme and invited member states to provide bilateral assistance.

15. The Council discussed the forthcoming elections in Croatia and expressed regret that these would not be held on a date corresponding to general European practices.

16. The Council welcomed the positive developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and looked forward to early implementation of commitments made by the Joint Presidency in New York on 15 December.

17. The Council discussed the recent elections in Macedonia, including re-runs in certain constituencies, and took note of the OSCE/ODIHR assessment that the election process was generally carried out in a satisfactory manner although some irregularities were experienced.

Transparency/Openness

18. The Council welcomed the joint Swedish/Danish initiative to improve transparency and public access to documents into the EU.

British Embassies

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs under what statutory authority staff at British embassies within the European Union are able to purchase alcohol duty-free. [102769]

Mr. Hain: Article 36(1) of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations obliges the receiving State to permit entry of, and grant exemption from all customs duties, taxes and related charges on, articles for the official use of the diplomatic mission and articles for the personal use of a diplomatic agent or members of his/her family forming part of the household. The matter in which that obligation is transposed into domestic law is a matter for each individual State Party to the Convention. In the UK Article 36 of the Convention has the force of law by virtue of the Diplomatic Privileges Act 1964.

Peat

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his Department's policy is on the purchase and use of peat for its own operations and activities; and what performance targets his Department has set to reduce current peat use. [103016]

Mr. Hain: Our policy is that the use of peat should be avoided and manures, coir, bark chippings and organic fertilizers used instead.

Russia

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of current diplomatic relations with Russia; and if he will make a statement. [103189]

Mr. Vaz: The main focus on our current relations with Russia is Chechnya and our concerns about the human cost of military action there. The European Council on 10–11 December agreed to freeze some EU assistance to Russia as a signal that it cannot be business as usual while indiscriminate use of force continues. We are continuing to press the Russians to seek a political solution, making use of the good offices of the OSCE.

The UK continues to seek a closer working relationship with Russia and to do all that we can to help it build a democratic and stable Russia that is engaged with the outside world. That must remain the right strategic policy goal.

Qualified Majority Voting (EU)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which articles of the treaties of the *(a)* European Union and *(b)* European Communities which require unanimity have been proposed for amendment in favour of qualified majority voting; in which cases Her Majesty's Government agrees with such a change; and where unanimity applies to change by the Council of Ministers of decisions already taken by another Institution established by those treaties. [103134]

Mr. Vaz: The IGC will not begin until early next year. As a result no formal proposals have yet been put forward for Treaty amendment. The Government have made its position clear on numerous occasions. We shall consider the extension of QMV on a case by case basis. Where it is in Britain's interests we shall support it. But where key national interests need to be protected, such as border controls, defence, Treaty change and taxation, we shall insist on retaining unanimity.

EU Membership

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those countries seeking EU membership which will have to raise their external tariffs to qualify for membership. [103388]

Mr. Vaz: On accession to the EU, candidate countries will have to apply the same external tariff as the EC. In general, candidate countries currently have agricultural tariffs which are lower than those of the EU while their industrial tariffs are often higher. The Commission is presently studying the detailed implications including the potential impact on other WTO members and the Union's obligations under Article XXIV of GATT.

Bonded Labour

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will call for reports on how many people have been successfully

prosecuted in Pakistan under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992 for employing bonded labour since this law was passed. [103872]

Mr. Hain: We share concerns about bonded labour in Pakistan. We have urged the Pakistani authorities to fully implement the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992 which abolishes the practice. There are no reliable statistics about the number of people prosecuted under the Act. We are in contact, however, with human rights groups in Pakistan who monitor this issue.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will call for reports on how many people have been successfully prosecuted in India under *(a)* the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976 and *(b)* the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, for employing bonded labour since these laws were passed. [103873]

Mr. Hain: We are concerned about bonded labour. I raised the issue with my Indian interlocutors during my visit there last month. Our High Commissioner in New Delhi met the Secretary of the Indian National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes on 8 October. We currently have no plans to ask the Indian Government to supply reports on the number of people prosecuted under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act or the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

Papal Visit (Tomb of Abraham)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made since 1 November to *(a)* the United Nations and *(b)* the Vatican about the proposed visit of His Holiness the Pope to the Tomb of Abraham. [103573]

Mr. Hain: None.

Eddie Izzard

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what engagements the Minister for Europe held with Mr. Eddie Izzard on 1 December. [103034]

Mr. Vaz: In Paris, Mr. Izzard and I gave an interview to the "Today" programme and attended a meeting to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Council of Europe. We then boarded the Eurostar and, during the journey, spoke to passengers about Europe. On arrival at Waterloo we held a press conference.

Karen People

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received concerning the policies and actions of the Government of Burma in respect of the Karen people. [103123]

Mr. Battle: We continue to receive disturbing reports of human rights violations against the ethnic minorities, including Karen, in Burma. These violations include arbitrary killings, rape, torture, mass arrests, forced labour and forced relocations. These abuses have been highlighted in the UN General Assembly resolution adopted on 19 November, which the UK co-sponsored. We make regular representations to the regime on this issue.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received on the conditions experienced by the Karen people in Thai camps. [103122]

Mr. Battle: The British Embassy in Bangkok is in close contact with the Thai authorities, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) giving assistance to the refugee camps, including regular meetings. Embassy officials have also visited the camps, most recently Mae La and Umpiam Mai camps on 22–23 November: this was an opportunity to see the results of the successful relocation of two camps (Mawker and Wangka) close to the border which had proved vulnerable to attacks in the past. The Thai authorities administer the camps in close co-operation with UNHCR and NGOs. The refugees themselves are actively involved in implementing the programmes of assistance provided by NGOs. The UK is an important contributor to the Burma Border Consortium, one of the leading NGOs providing food and shelter to refugees. We will continue to pay close attention to the plight of Burmese refugees in Thailand.

Entry Appeals

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many appeals against refusal to enter his Department has lost in the last 12 months, indicating how many were for overseas students wishing to study in the UK. [103405]

Mr. Vaz: The latest year for which we have statistics on the outcome of entry clearance appeals is the financial year 1998–99, for which we have figures based on estimates supplied by the Lord Chancellor's Department. These include figures for appeals against refusal of entry clearance for temporary purposes. Students are included in this category, but separate statistics are not kept on student appeals.

Outcome of adjudicator appeals against refusal of entry clearance 1998–99

Total dealt with	*Allowed*	*Dismissed*	*Withdrawn* [1]
1,700	400	1,200	100

[1] Includes cases where the appellant withdrew the appeal because the Home Office had conceded the case, as well as those where the appellant decided not to pursue the appeal further.

BBC World Service

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will publish his review of the funding arrangements for BBC World Service Monitoring since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [103541]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as sponsor Department, is currently undertaking a two-year review with the other Stakeholder Departments (MOD, BBC World Service and Cabinet Office) of BBC Monitoring's Overall Operating Regime. This was provided for in the 1996 agreement between BBCM and the FCO which came into force in April 1997. A decision on publication will be taken when the review is complete.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs since 1997, what has been the financial contribution to BBC World Service Monitoring of *(a)* his Department, *(b)* the MOD, *(c)* BBC World Service and *(d)* other sources, together with the names of those sources; and what are the forecast contributions for each of the next three years. [103542]

Mr. Hain: The financial contributions to BBC Monitoring for the years 1997–1998 to 1999–2000 are:

£000

	1997–1998	1998–1999	1999–2000
FCO	[1]7,181	7,011	7,457
MOD	7,165	7,275	7,404
BBC World Service	4,115	4,162	4,266
Cabinet Office	168	172	180
Other	1,595	2,340	2,952
Total Income	20,224	20,960	22,259

[1] This includes a £250k capital roll-over from 1996–1997.

The "other sources" include other parts of the BBC and commercial revenue. Contributions for 2000–2001 are still under consideration; funding for 2001–2004 is subject to agreement on the 2000 Spending Round.

Gibraltar

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 111W, on Gibraltar, for what reason no representations have been made to Spain specifically in relation to the border incident on 29 November; and if he will make a statement. [103543]

Mr. Vaz: To our knowledge, there has been no subsequent repetition of the incident on 29 November. We have also noted that the individual in question was not prevented from crossing the border. We have therefore seen no need to raise this specific case with the Spanish authorities but we will continue to monitor carefully the situation at the border.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister if he will set out the title of each report published to date by the Performance and Innovation Unit, stating in each case the cost implications of the recommendations made. [101179]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The Performance and Innovation Unit has published three reports to date:

"Encryption and law enforcement", published in May 1999;

"e-commerce@its.best.uk", published in September 1999; and

"Rural economies", published in December 1999.

For the e-commerce project, it was considered that most recommendations could be implemented within existing resources, although reprioritisation of resources would be needed in some areas. The project team recommended further work to look at the full resource implications and the scope for private/public sector partnerships.

The encryption and law enforcement project recommended the setting up of a technical assistance centre to help law enforcement agencies. The detailed cost implications of this and other recommendations are being assessed by other Departments, in particular the Home Office and HM Treasury.

The Rural Economies report raised a range of issues for discussion which are being taken forward by the Rural White Paper Team, in the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Copies of all three reports are available in the Library.

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Prime Minister what reports have been prepared by the Performance and Innovation Unit; and which of these have been published. [103130]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I have given to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) today and to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bath on 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 111–12W.

Parliamentary Oath

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister if he will seek to introduce alternative versions of the oath taken by hon. Members to reflect republican views. [101957]

The Prime Minister: There are no plans to introduce alternative versions of the oath of allegiance.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Prime Minister for each of the buildings under his office's control, how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102443]

The Prime Minister: For this purpose, my office is part of the Cabinet Office. I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to him today by my right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, *Official Report*, column 574W.

London Underground

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 820, if he will list the total Government-funded investment in the London Underground for each of the last six years and the projection of such funding up to 2001. [102620]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government provide funding to London Transport (LT) for investment. LT allocates this grant to its businesses including London Underground Ltd.

The previous Government planned to provide a grant of £161 million (cash) to London Transport for this year (1999–2000). We increased it by nearly £600 million to £740 million.

The following table shows investment in the London Underground between 1979 and 2000–2001.

Investment in LUL between 1979 and 2000–01
(all figures £ million at 1998–99 prices)

Year	Underground core	PFI	Underground excl. JLE	JLE	Total incl. JLE
1979	178	—	178	—	178
1980	180	—	180	—	180
1981	192	—	192	—	192
1982	162	—	162	—	162
1983	208	—	208	—	208
1984–85	264	—	264	—	264
1985–86	244	—	244	—	244
1986–87	283	—	283	—	283
1987–88	334	—	334	—	334
1988–89	303	—	303	—	303
1989–90	421	—	421	—	421
1990–91	526	—	526	52	579
1991–92	357	—	357	74	431
1992–93	732	—	732	78	810
1993–94	548	—	548	288	835
1994–95	563	—	563	413	976
1995–96	525	123	648	636	1,284
1996–97	389	145	534	689	1,223
1997–98	332	165	497	487	984
1998–99	415	53	468	283	751
1999–2000[1]	343	175	518	265	783
2000–01[1]	366	143	509	207	717

[1] 1999–2000 and 2000–01 figures are forecasts of investment in London Underground.

Note:
The PFI figures are not estimates of what the private sector is investing in London Transport. Includes London Transport's estimates of what investment in PFI projects would have cost had LT done the investment themselves.

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 820, what the factual basis was for his statement that the Government are investing more in the London Underground than the last Government. [102619]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government provide funding to London Transport (LT) for investment. LT allocates this grant to its businesses including London Underground Ltd. (LUL).

The previous Government planned to provide a grant of £161 million (cash) to London Transport for this year (1999–2000). We increased it by nearly £600 million to £740 million.

The following table shows average investment during the periods 1979–1996/97 and between 1997–98 and 2000–01. This shows that on average, investment in the Underground, including or excluding JLE and PFI during the latter period was higher than between 1979 and 1996–97.

Average investment in the Underground
(all figures are £ million at 1998–99 prices)

	1979 to 1996–97	1997–98 to 2000–01[1]
Core Underground	356	364
Core Underground plus PFI[2] investment	371	498
Core Underground plus PFI[2] investment plus JLE	495	809

[1] 1999–2000 and beyond include forecasts of investment in London Underground.
[2] Includes London Transport's estimates of what investment in PFI projects would have cost had LT done the investment themselves.

Cabinet Committees

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister what is the membership of each Cabinet Committee. [101710]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* I have placed a copy of the current list of Cabinet Committees in the Library of the House. Details will also be updated on the Cabinet Office website.

Leak Investigations

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will provide a breakdown by Department of *(a)* current leak investigations and *(b)* leak investigations since 1 May 1997. [103201]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 December]:* Sixty leak investigations have been notified to the Cabinet Office by Departments since 1 May 1997. This compares with 70 in the last two full years of the last Administration.

A breakdown by Department of leak investigations notified to the Cabinet Office since 1 May 1997 is given in the table:

Department	Number of leak investigations
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	2
Cabinet Office	4
Directorate of Civil Nuclear Security	2
Crown Prosecution Service	3
HM Customs and Excise	3
Ministry of Defence	5
Department for Education and Employment	1
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions	4
Office of Fair Trading	1
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1
Department of Health	7
Home Office	9
Lord Chancellor's Department	2
Northern Ireland Office	7
Scottish Office	1
Department of Social Security	5
Department of Trade and Industry	3

Chinese Embassy Bombing (Belgrade)

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 60W, on the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, if he will list the circumstances to which he refers which led to the strike against the Chinese Embassy. [103202]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The United States Government explained the circumstances to the Chinese Government on 17 June 1999. The text of the presentation made by the United States was made publicly available on 6 July via the US State Department website (www.state.gov/www/policy—remarks/1999).

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received concerning allegations relating to the United States bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade; and what response his Government have made. [103203]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* None.

Downing Street Dinner

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 16 December (ref. 102121) if the dinner held on 21 October at No. 10 Downing Street was undertaken in an official capacity. [103749]

The Prime Minister: I have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals. As with previous Administrations it is not my practice to provide details of all such meetings.

Hans von Sponeck

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what representations Her Majesty's Government have made since 1 November to the United Nations about the position of Hans von Sponeck as United Nations Co-ordinator in Baghdad. [103574]

The Prime Minister: We expressed concern about some aspects of Mr. von Sponeck's performance to the UN Secretary-General on 5 November.

Civil Nuclear Safety

Dr. Godman: To ask the Prime Minister if, following the establishment of the devolved administrations, he will make a statement on the departmental responsibilities for civil nuclear safety. [104004]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry answers to the House on civil nuclear safety. Following devolution, his accountability for safety now extends to Scotland, as well as England and Wales. There are no licensed sites in Northern Ireland. Advice to Ministers on nuclear safety policy is given by the independent Health and Safety Commission, with day-to-day regulation at licensed nuclear sites a matter for the Health and Safety Executive through its Nuclear Installations Inspectorate.

A summary of the responsibilities of Ministers and other organisations in this area has been placed in the Libraries of the House as well as on the DTI and HSE websites.

SCOTLAND

Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the number of *(a)* non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* task forces in Scotland (i) on 1 May 1997, (ii) on 1 May 1998 and (iii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [102489]

Dr. Reid: The table sets out the number of non-departmental public bodies in Scotland:

	Number
At 1 April 1997	242
At 1 April 1998	208
At 1 April 1999	188

Details of task forces announced before 1 May 1997 are not held centrally. Since 1 May 1997, a total of six task forces have been announced.

Beef Ban

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he was first informed of the offer made to the Prime Minister by the French Government to lift the ban on the import of grass-fed beef from Scotland. [103661]

Dr. Reid: The French Government did not make a formal offer to lift the ban on the import of grass-fed beef from Scotland.

HEALTH

Ill Health (Incomes)

12. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to measure the links between low incomes and ill health. [102273]

Yvette Cooper: One of our first actions in Government was to commission Sir Donald Acheson to undertake an "Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health". Sir Donald's report was published in November 1998. The report clearly identifies the significance of income as one of the wider determinants of health and recommends action to tackle this.

The Government are taking measures to tackle low income. These include the Minimum Income Guarantee, Winter Fuel Payments for Pensioners, Working Families Tax Credit, National Minimum Wage, Sure Start and an increase in Child Benefit. A first annual report, "Opportunity for all—Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion", was published in September.

NHS Direct

18. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was each monthly total for calls to NHS Direct. [102279]

Ms Stuart: In October 1999, NHS Direct handled 109,000 calls. I expect that by the end of this year, NHS Direct will have helped around 1 million callers since the service began. From December this year, NHS Direct has been extended to cover over 65 per cent. of the population of England. The scope of the service has also been extended by the publication in December of the NHS Direct Healthcare Guide and the launch of NHS Direct on-line. This means that a greater proportion of the population will have access to high quality health care information and advice.

Organ Donation

19. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on organ donation. [102280]

Mr. Denham: We are concerned about the shortages of organs for transplantation. That is why last year we launched our campaign to encourage people to join the NHS Organ Donor Register, to carry the Donor Card and, most importantly, make their wishes known to their family and friends. In February, this was reinforced by

action specifically targeted at the South Asian community where the shortage of donated organs is particularly marked. We are also planning a further campaign informing clinicians about best practice in requesting organ donation.

We are looking at a range of options for increasing the supply of organs for transplantation. We have, however, always stated that any measure aimed at increasing donation must command public confidence.

We are grateful to my hon. Friend for the proposal he is investigating with the British Bankers' Association to include an Organ Donation Logo on credit cards and are happy to offer him every encouragement.

Eye Tests

20. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many eye tests have been carried out on people aged over 65 years since April. [102281]

Mr. Hutton: We estimate that, since April, some 50,000 more people have been receiving National Health Service sight tests each week following our decision to extend eligibility for NHS tests to everyone aged 60 or over. Most of these patients will have been aged over 65.

Private Medical Services

21. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the protection of patients using private medical services. [102282]

Ms Stuart: We are determined to give the public proper protection and have set out our plans for improvements to the regulation of private and voluntary healthcare in the Care Standards Bill. Among other things we will:

- create a separate division within the National Care Standards Commission that will concentrate on private and voluntary healthcare;
- introduce national minimum standards with which registered establishments will have to comply;
- ensure that all establishments have proper complaints procedures as a condition of registration;
- widen the scope of regulation particularly to include private primary medical care.

Local Authority Social Care

22. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the standards of local authority social care. [102283]

24. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the standards of local authority social care. [102285]

Mr. Hutton: We are taking a range of measures to drive up standards in social services. There will be a new independent regulation system for care homes, children's homes and other care services, including those directly provided by local authorities, based on national standards. The Fair Access to Care initiative will require local authorities to apply eligibility criteria consistently around the country. Our proposed Quality Strategy for Social Services will help raise local standards.

The implementation of these initiatives will be monitored closely. For the first time there is a comprehensive performance assessment system for social services, built around the Best Value regime.

38. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his guidance on the standards of local authority social care. [102299]

Mr. Hutton: On 8 September the Department issued the consultation document, "Fit for the Future?—National Required Standards for Residential and Nursing Homes for Older People", which sets out proposals to promote better quality care and help to prevent abuse by grounding practice on the principles of dignity, choice, privacy and respect. They will guarantee residents access to an effective complaints procedure. The standards will also ensure that residents are cared for by trustworthy and reliable staff who are properly trained for this difficult and sensitive job.

"Fit for the Future?" contains over 250 proposed national standards and we look forward to receiving comments on the whole range of proposals. We will carefully consider all the comments we receive before finalising the standards and the timetable for implementing them. The standards will apply to all provision whether private, voluntary or statutory.

Primary Health Care

23. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about raising standards of primary health care in the NHS. [102284]

Mr. Denham: Improving quality across the National Health Service, including in primary care, is at the heart of this Government's modernisation programme, as set out in "A First Class Service: Quality in the new NHS".

Locally, all NHS bodies have a duty to put arrangements in place to assure and improve the quality of care they provide by establishing arrangements for clinical governance.

Centrally, we have established the National Institute for Clinical Excellence; a programme of National Service Frameworks; and the Commission for Health Improvement.

Cervical Cancer

25. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to incorporate the human papilloma test in cervical cancer screening. [102286]

Yvette Cooper: An outline proposal on pilot studies using HPV testing as triage for mild and borderline smears was discussed at the National Screening Committee's meeting in Belfast on 8 December 1999. The Health Departments are now considering their advice, and we hope to make a statement shortly.

Community Hospital Services

26. **Dr. Harris:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for developing community hospital services. [102287]

Mr. Denham: Our vision for a faster, fairer, more convenient National Health Service includes an important role for community hospitals, provided they meet appropriate quality, fairness and efficiency tests, and they are in the right place to meet the needs of local people for modern services.

In-patient Care

27. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the local provision of in-patient hospital care in *(a)* Lichfield and *(b)* Burntwood. [102288]

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will be aware that South Staffordshire Health Authority is currently undertaking a wide-ranging strategic review of services. I understand that the Health Authority is still working-up proposals, and as such it would not be possible for me to comment at this time on the likely impact for hospital services in the Lichfield and Burntwood area.

NHS Abortions

28. **Dr. Tonge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action his Department is taking to ensure equality of access to NHS abortion services. [102289]

Yvette Cooper: It is for local health authorities and Primary Care Groups to determine the appropriate level of abortion provision, in the light of the needs of their local population.

The National Sexual Health Strategy, which is currently being developed, will look at all aspects of sexual health including access to services.

Elderly Care

29. **Mr. Colvin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of NHS provision for elderly patients. [102290]

Mr. Hutton: In 1997, the then Secretary of State my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) commissioned the Health Advisory Service to undertake an independent inquiry into the care of older people on acute wards in general hospitals. The resulting report, "Not Because They Are Old" was sent under cover of a health service circular to health authorities and National Health Service trusts in November 1999.

The circular required Chief Executives of health authorities, in partnership with colleagues in NHS trusts and social services, to ensure that the findings of the report are considered when preparing joint investment plans for older people. These joint investment plans are an integral part of local health improvement programmes (HImPs) which will include both national and local priorities. We are also developing a national service framework for older people which will set out, for the first time, national standards for the health care of older people. The national service framework will be published next year.

We have also taken steps to address a number of areas to improve the care of older people. For example, we have introduced free sight tests for people over 60 and free immunisation against influenza for people aged 75 and over. Our plans to expand cataract services from 170,000 a year to 250,000 will benefit thousands of older people.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he is holding with *(a)* hospitals, *(b)* nursing homes and *(c)* residential care homes about the treatment of elderly patients; and if he will make a statement. [103650]

Mr. Hutton: We are determined that elderly people, wherever they are being cared for, receive high quality services and are treated with dignity and respect. We are working in a number of areas to ensure this happens.

Officials hold discussions with health and local authorities who have been working together and with a range of local stakeholders to produce joint investment plans for older people. Local stakeholders include representatives of patients or clients and their carers and those who provide care for the elderly in hospital or in a residential or nursing home setting. These plans consider service quality and effectiveness and identify key priorities for change.

We will publish our national service framework for older people next year. This will set national standards, service models, and establish performance measures against which progress will be measured.

We are also developing national standards for residential care homes and nursing homes. The consultation document "Fit for the Future? National Required Standards for Residential and Nursing Homes for Older People" sets out proposals aimed at promoting better quality care and helping prevent abuse. "Fit for the Future?" was sent to major provider organisations as well as regulatory and user interests. The consultation period ends on 21 January.

Guidance for developing multi-agency codes of practice for dealing with incidents of abuse to vulnerable adults is being produced with the Home Office, the Wales Office, the police, social services, health and the voluntary sector. "No secrets" was launched for consultation in September. We plan to issue a final version of the guidance to authorities in the new year.

Health Services (Oxfordshire)

30. **Mr. Woodward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on health service provision in Oxfordshire. [102291]

Mr. Denham: It is for individual health authorities and local National Health Service trusts to make decisions on local health service provision and priorities based on their specialised knowledge of the local community.

All parties, including Oxfordshire Health Authority, local NHS trusts and primary care groups are working closely to ensure that patients in Oxfordshire receive high quality health care.

Worcester Royal Infirmary

31. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the morale of medical staff working at Worcester royal infirmary. [102292]

Mr. Denham: We are aware of the hard work being put in by the front-line staff at Worcester Royal Infirmary, and indeed all hospitals throughout the county, this winter. I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those staff and assure them of our continuing and absolute support.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Worcester Royal Infirmary on becoming a Beacon Site for its outpatient work on ophthalmology. I am pleased to report that the medical staff at the Worcester Royal Infirmary National Health Service Trust are able to look forward with confidence as their new hospital will be delivered on time by the Government. The promise made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the people of Worcester is now clearly visible and is part of the largest building programme in the history of the NHS, and a cornerstone of the modernisation of health services in Worcestershire.

Out-patient Waiting Times

32. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of out-patient waiting times in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; and if he will make a statement. [102293]

Mr. Denham: Despite a combination of increased referrals and reductions in activity due to the eclipse, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority, working together with the local trusts, is taking action to address outpatient waiting times and will reduce the number of long waiters by the end of the year.

Cardiology Services (East Lancashire)

33. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to enhance cardiology services in east Lancashire. [102294]

Yvette Cooper: I shall write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of my answer in the Library.

Primary Care Groups

34. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will report progress on setting up primary care groups. [102295]

Mr. Denham: 481 primary care groups have been successfully established. 83 per cent. have opted to take on a substantial commissioning role and are operating at level 2. PCGs have taken responsibility for £11 billion.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress of the primary care groups that cover Shrewsbury and Atcham in moving toward level 4 status. [103307]

Mr. Denham: Primary care group progression to primary care trust status at level 3 or 4 is a local decision driven on local views. After a public meeting the Shrewsbury and Atcham PCG Board have concluded that they are not ready to progress to primary care trust status at this time.

Health Inequality

35. **Ms Blears:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made in eradicating health inequality. [102296]

Yvette Cooper: I shall write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and a copy of my answer will be placed in the Library of the House.

British American Tobacco (Records)

36. **Mr. Gunnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had with representatives of British American Tobacco about increasing public access to the records held by it on deposit at Guildford. [102297]

Yvette Cooper: I shall write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and a copy of my answer will be placed in the Library of the House.

Ritalin

37. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to investigate possible harmful side-effects of Ritalin. [102298]

Yvette Cooper: I shall write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and a copy of my answer will be placed in the Library of the House.

Waiting Times

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to achieve a reduction in waiting times. [102270]

Mr. Denham: We remain on track to achieve our manifesto commitment to reduce waiting lists by 100,000 from the level inherited.

NHS Personnel (Violence)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to prevent violence against NHS personnel. [102276]

Mr. Denham: A cross-government campaign NHS zero tolerance zone was launched in October, underpinned by a national target to reduce violence against staff by 20 per cent. by 2001 and by 30 per cent. by 2003. By April 2000, all NHS trusts are required to have systems in place to record incidences of violence to staff, and also to have local reduction strategies in place.

Smoking

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government's proposals to reduce smoking in public places. [102277]

Yvette Cooper: The Government have supported the licensed hospitality trade's Public Places Charter to increase the provision of non-smoking facilities in pubs, hotels and restaurants. The Health and Safety Commission has consulted on introducing an Approved Code of Practice on smoking in the workplace. We look forward to the Commission's conclusions.

Disablement Services

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce a national service framework on disablement services. [102345]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans to introduce a national service framework (NSF) on disablement services. The next two NSFs will be for older people, (2000), and diabetes, (2001). Ministers will consider the service area or care group for the NSF to follow diabetes against the criteria found in the document A First Class Service, which set out in detail how standards would be set, delivered and monitored.

Hepatitis C

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many haemophiliacs there are infected by blood containing hepatitis C in each health authority area. [102594]

Mr. Denham: We do not hold this information centrally for individual health authorities. We estimate that 4,000 people with haemophilia were infected with hepatitis C before blood products were virally inactivated.

Organ Removal

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the extent of the practice by which organs have been removed from deceased adult patients without consent, indicating the number of institutions involved in the last five years. [102826]

Mr. Denham: We have asked the Chief Medical Officer to conduct an investigation into the removal and retention of tissues and organs at post-mortem examination within the National Health Service. This is now under way and he will produce his report in September.

Correspondence

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Health Services Directorate will reply to the letter dated 15 September from Mr. Trevor Mytton of the Shropshire Wheelchair Users Group regarding the Wheelchair Service and Voucher Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [102990]

Mr. Hutton: A senior official responded to Mr. Mytton's letter of 15 September by telephone. A letter has now been sent to him.

Public Appointments

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if membership of private health insurance schemes precludes appointment to the boards of *(a)* health trusts and *(b)* health authorities. [103065]

Mr. Denham: No. However, to be appointed to these posts, candidates must be able to demonstrate a strong personal commitment to the National Health Service.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the elective waiting list total was for the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital on *(a)* 1 May 1997 and *(b)* the latest date for which data is available; and if he will make a statement. [103305]

Mr. Denham: Waiting list information for 1997 is available only on a quarterly and not a monthly basis. Figures are therefore not available for 1 May 1997. At 31 March 1997, there was a total of 4,245 people on the in-patient elective waiting list at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, and at 31 October 1999 the number of patients waiting for elective in-patient treatment was 4,262.

We are pleased to be able to commend the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital for maintaining in-patient waiting list standards and for achieving their contribution to the countywide in-patient target last year. I am also delighted to learn that the Trust is on track to meet its target again this year.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress made to modernise the accident and emergency unit at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital. [103306]

Ms Stuart: We are committed to modernising and improving accident and emergency facilities for the benefit of both patients and staff. The Royal Shrewsbury Hospital National Health Service Trust has received £600,000 from the Government's accident and emergency modernisation fund for the development of an assessment unit, a decontamination facility and improved security.

The new developments are progressing well; plans for the design and development of the assessment unit are currently under discussion, and this facility is due for completion in the new financial year. New equipment has already been ordered, which can be used prior to completion within the existing facilities. Security has already been improved, and this will be extended further on completion of the assessment unit with the installation of additional CCTV cameras. A decontamination unit has also been ordered.

Telemedicine (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what pilot schemes for telemedicine and test result links between general practitioner's and hospitals he has set up in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [103304]

Ms Stuart: The Royal Shrewsbury Hospital National Health Service Trust is one of two hospitals in the country taking part in a major pilot into the use of telemedicine. The pilot aims to explore the benefits of using telemedicine, and when completed, which should be around June 2000, will report its findings to the NHS research body.

The Royal Shrewsbury Hospital has also established a test results links service, linking the hospital with local general practitioner practices. This system, which has developed into a countywide service, enables hospitals to transmit test results electronically to those GP practices involved, so providing a faster, more efficient service for the benefit of both patients and staff.

Telemedicine is a key part of the Government's plans for modernising and reconfiguring the NHS and the White Paper "The New NHS" stated our commitment to

> "developing telemedicine to ensure specialist skills are available to all parts of the country".

The development of the NHSnet, which will be capable of connecting GP's and hospitals for the exchange of test requests and results, will enable rapid and accurate exchange of information within a modernised, more efficient NHS.

Patient Confidentiality

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health under what circumstances a medical practitioner can be required to supply to a third party information given by a patient in confidence. [103741]

Ms Stuart: A medical practitioner may only be required to pass on confidential patient information to a third party, when this requirement is imposed by legislation or a court of law.

Fraud Investigation Unit

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many complaints he has received about the activities of the Fraud Investigation Unit of the Prescription Pricing Authority in each of the last three years. [R] [103100]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* In the time available, the Department has been able only to check records from April 1998 to the present. In that period, the Department received letters of complaint about the Fraud Investigation Unit's activities from four individual patients, two dispensing appliance contractors and one representative body.

Wheelchairs

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has issued to health authorities to ensure that wheelchair voucher users are made aware of alternative providers of wheelchairs outside the NHS. [R] [103095]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* Health Service Guidance (96) 53 advised health authorities, National Health Service trusts and wheelchair service managers to negotiate arrangements with local wheelchair suppliers who were willing to participate in the voucher scheme. It proposed that minimum standards should reflect the supplier's ability to offer a choice of products, have demonstration stock, local showroom and repair capability, including adequate stocks of locally held spare parts. Membership of a trade association with minimum entry conditions which cover the above criteria would serve as an adequate indication of acceptability.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the York Economic Consortium Review of the wheelchair voucher scheme will be published; and if he will make a statement. [103662]

Mr. Hutton: We are currently considering the report's recommendations and hope to announce my response in the near future.

Adoption

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what change there has been in the number of looked-after children adopted since his Department issued adoption guidance and launched Quality Protects in 1998; and if he will make a statement. [104123]

Mr. Hutton: For the year to 31 March 1999, the initial estimate from local authorities of looked-after children adopted was 2,200, an increase of 200 over 1998 which represents an increase of nearly 11 per cent. The number of looked-after children placed for adoption was 2,900, an increase of 500 over 1998.

These figures are encouraging: adoption is a priority within Government's Quality Protects programme to transform children's services. It is now essential to go further. As part of our Quality Protects programme, the Government will shortly publish the results of the Social Services Inspectorate's survey of all 150 local authority adoption services. SSI are also now undertaking in-depth inspections of selected adoption services. Additionally, we are developing rigorous performance indicators; improving statistical and management information; promoting the messages of recent research and undertaking new research on maximising adoption and minimising delay; considering with the Lord Chancellor's Department how court processes can best contribute to effective and timely decision-making; and supporting initiatives to increase the number of adopters, particularly from minority ethnic communities, including working with the Association of Directors of Social Services and the Commission for Racial Equality. The Department is supporting, with a grant of £50,000, the BBC series to promote interest in adoption and fostering to be broadcast in January.

"Adoption Now—Messages from Research", published in October, covers the planning and management of adoption services, monitoring of looked-after children, avoiding delay in placing children with new families, more robust and targeted recruitment programmes, greater collaboration with the voluntary sector, adoption by single people, the needs of older children and those from ethnic minority communities and the importance of listening to children.

The Government are determined that there will be lasting improvements in the adoption services. We must not fail these children.

Spinal Injuries

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which *(a)* health boards and *(b)* NHS trusts have funded referrals to the Spinal Foundation in Rochdale of patients suffering from spinal injuries in the last five years. [103764]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has undertaken into the clinical effectiveness of endoscopic laser-assisted foraminoplasty in relation to patients suffering from spinal injuries. [103765]

Mr. Denham: Endoscopic laser foraminoplasty was referred to the Safety and Efficacy Register of New Interventional Procedures (SERNIP) in July 1999. SERNIP found that the evidence presently available did not demonstrate safety and efficacy, and categorised the procedure as one that should be used only as part of a primary research programme, using appropriate methodology and registered with SERNIP.

Research Data

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if general practitioners and NHS establishments

are obliged to obtain patients' consent for the forwarding of anonymised computerised research data to the GPRO database at the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement. [103480]

Ms Stuart: The Department is awaiting a Court of Appeal ruling on the existence and extent of any duty of confidentiality in respect of anonymised patient information. I will write to my hon. Friend once the ruling is known.

Primary Care Trusts

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he is making on the development of Primary Care Trusts. [102262]

Mr. Denham: Excellent progress has been made towards Primary Care Trust development with 68 Primary Care Groups proposing to make applications to become 63 PCTs in the year 2000.

Dispensing Appliance Contractors

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to publish new guidelines governing the remuneration of dispensing appliance contractors. [R] [103093]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* A consultation document will be published in due course. It will set out options for change to appliance contractor arrangements and will invite comments.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Wood Committee

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make regulations implementing the report of the 2nd Wood Committee. [104067]

Ms Armstrong: In September we broadly accepted the recommendations of the 2nd Wood Committee on the rating of plant and machinery in the prescribed industries. I have today published draft regulations which will implement that decision. The Government would welcome views on the draft regulations by Friday 28 January 2000.

We are considering whether the Committee's recommendation of a tools of the trade exemption for the power industry should be extended to generating plant and machinery in combined heat and power installations. We will make decisions on this shortly.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what scope local planning authorities have to consider the proposed siting and appearance of mobile telephone masts. [104085]

Mr. Raynsford: Government planning policy for telecommunications is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 8 (revised): Telecommunications, and the Department's Circular 4/99 "Planning for Telecommunications". These underline the importance of close consultation between operators and local planning authorities before an application is made to an authority to install a telecommunications mast.

The installation of any telecommunications mast in protected areas, such as National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and conservation areas, and of masts above 15 metres in height elsewhere, is subject to a planning application for determination by the local planning authority. In the case of masts up to 15 metres in height, local planning authorities are able to consider the siting and appearance of such development by licensed telecommunications code system operators in accordance with the "prior approval procedure" under Part 24 of Schedule 2 to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (as amended).

Under the prior approval procedure for ground-based masts, a local planning authority has the opportunity to say whether it wishes to approve, within 42 days, details of the siting and appearance of the installation. Following recent amendments to the Order, the procedure includes a requirement that the operator should erect a site notice to publicise the development proposed, in order to provide the public with a clear opportunity to comment to the local planning authority on the siting and appearance of the proposed mast. If an authority considers that the development will pose a serious threat to amenity, it is able to refuse approval, although authorities are advised to explore the scope for modifying its siting and/or appearance before doing so.

The Government's policy is to encourage mast and site sharing, where that is appropriate. Circular 4/99 makes clear our expectation that developers should provide evidence to local planning authorities that they have carefully considered the use of existing masts, buildings and other structures before seeking to erect any new mast, regardless of size. The authority may be justified in refusing prior approval or planning permission if it considers the evidence regarding the consideration of such alternative sites is not satisfactory.

The Government are aware of public concern about mobile phone systems and health and have set up an independent expert group to advise on possible risk to health. The group, chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, is currently holding open meetings around the UK to take views.

The Government have consulted on a draft circular on land-use planning and electromagnetic fields and will finalise it as soon as practicable.

Environment Agency

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the new Chairman of the Environment Agency. [104131]

Mr. Meacher: Sir John Harman will succeed Lord De Ramsey as Chairman on 1 January 2000. Sir John is currently Deputy Chairman of the Agency. The appointment will be for four years.

I am delighted that he has accepted our offer. The Agency plays a central role in protecting and enhancing the environment in England and Wales, and the Chairman must lead in determining the strategic direction, inspire the staff and ensure that it discharges its statutory duties fully.

I believe that in Sir John we have found someone who has the ability and vision which are needed to lead such a major public sector organisation, and to develop a successful relationship with the wide range of bodies that have dealings with the Agency.

I would also like to thank Lord De Ramsey for his contribution in bringing the Agency into being, and for steering it through the early days when it has sought to develop a single corporate approach from the multiplicity of organisations from which it was constructed. The Agency has come a long way since it began work in 1996, and the next few years will set the course for its continuing development.

Benson *v.* Boyce

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend the law following the judgment in the case of Benson *v.* Boyce. [99514]

Mr. Hill: I am considering what approach it would be appropriate to adopt, in the light of consultation responses and legal advice.

Road Safety

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has conducted into the effectiveness of traffic *(a)* road humps, *(b)* speed cameras, *(c)* traffic lights, *(d)* coloured lines and *(e)* other safety devices in reducing road fatalities. [100655]

Mr. Hill: The Department has an extensive programme of road safety research covering a wide range of topics, including development and evaluation of various safety measures and devices designed to reduce road accidents. Full details of current research and summaries of results of completed research are provided in a Road Safety Research Compendium which is available on the Department's website (http://www.roads.detr.gov.uk/roadsafety/index.htm) and in the Library of the House. The compendium also gives full references of published research reports. The latest edition will be published shortly. Details of the Department's other research programmes are also available.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) for each London Underground line, what is the nature of the planned principal improvement works to be funded under the public private partnership in each of the next 15 years; what is the cost of each of the works at current prices; and how much of the capital expenditure on each line can be attributed to past funding constraints on the London Underground network; [100929]

(2) what provision the London Underground public private partnership includes for new rolling stock. [100930]

Mr. Hill: This information cannot be supplied in the form requested. PPP companies will be required to implement a combination of specific projects and performance enhancements specified in output terms. The PPP will not, therefore, in general specify particular amounts of money to be spent, nor particular works to be carried out, nor rolling stock to be purchased.

London Underground have made the following line-by-line estimates of how much it will cost to implement the performance regime being developed for the first 15 years of this proposed Public Private Partnership. They estimate that £1.2 billion of the total projected expenditure of £7.36 billion can be attributed to disinvestment due to past funding constraints on the Underground network.

Indicative projection of 15 year investment expenditure

Line	*£ million 1999–2000 prices*
Bakerloo	390
Central, Waterloo and City	780
Victoria	900
Northern[1]	950
Jubilee[2]	280
Piccadilly	1,190
Metropolitan, Circle, Hammersmith and City	1,700
District	970
East London[3]	200
Total	7,360

[1] Northern Line train investment costs are contracted for under a separate PFI scheme and are excluded from these figures.
[2] Excludes operating and maintenance costs for the Jubilee Line Extension project.
[3] Excludes costs from potential project for extending East London Line.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the maintenance and investment budget, in real terms, for rolling stock, signalling and track in each financial year since 1994–95 for *(a)* each line of the London Underground and *(b)* the London Underground as a whole. [100951]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* This is an operational matter for London Underground which has provided the information in the following table.

The figures for 1994–95 and 1995–96 reflect expenditure to modernise the Central Line.

London Underground Limited Investment and maintenance spend for rolling stock, signalling and track for the financial years 1994–95 to 1998–99

£ million (in 1998–99 prices)

Business unit	*1994–95*		*1995–96*		*1996–97*		*1997–98*		*1998–99*	
	Investment	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*
Bakerloo										
Rolling stock	10.0	4.7	1.7	4.4	1.9	4.3	3.4	4.7	6.2	4.6
Track	0.1	3.6	2.7	3.4	3.1	3.0	4.5	1.9	5.4	1.8
Signals	0.5	0.7	0.9	0.9	0.1	0.9	0.0	0.9	0.3	0.6
Central										
Rolling stock	90.5	8.9	3.4	10.1	4.5	10.8	1.4	10.6	4.8	12.4
Track	11.5	8.8	20.2	7.3	18.1	7.4	17.6	7.7	16.3	8.2
Signals	23.7	3.0	8.0	3.4	5.4	4.5	10.6	4.9	15.4	4.8
District										
Rolling stock	3.5	9.5	8.2	8.9	4.2	8.3	1.9	8.1	4.3	8.8
Track	1.8	8.3	11.3	5.9	5.5	6.8	7.1	5.3	4.2	6.6
Signals	0.5	2.4	2.3	2.5	1.8	2.7	1.9	2.7	3.7	3.1

London Underground Limited Investment and maintenance spend for rolling stock, signalling and track for the financial years 1994–95 to 1998–99

£ million (in 1998–99 prices)

	1994–95		1995–96		1996–97		1997–98		1998–99	
Business unit	*Investment*	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*	*Investment*	*Maintenance*
Jubilee/ELL										
Rolling stock	0.1	3.8	0.0	3.8	0.0	3.6	0.0	3.8	0.0	7.0
Track	1.1	2.9	5.6	2.9	7.7	3.4	7.6	3.3	1.0	3.4
Signals	3.0	1.0	3.1	1.0	1.1	1.0	0.2	1.1	0.0	1.9
Metropolitan/Circle										
Rolling stock	14.6	15.5	25.1	13.5	16.4	13.1	16.8	12.7	1.0	14.6
Track	1.2	9.9	13.6	8.2	5.1	6.5	5.6	7.0	9.0	8.2
Signals	1.2	7.3	2.9	6.9	5.9	3.2	5.1	3.1	3.6	3.1
Northern										
Rolling stock	11.9	10.3	5.1	11.5	0.5	11.6	5.2	14.5	5.5	14.1
Track	2.1	6.8	19.3	6.9	17.3	6.4	12.2	5.8	17.8	6.7
Signals	0.0	2.7	2.5	2.8	1.3	2.9	0.6	3.1	1.6	3.4
Piccadilly										
Rolling stock	7.8	8.8	14.6	8.2	22.8	8.3	22.5	8.9	22.9	10.0
Track	2.3	6.9	9.8	6.5	2.8	7.1	3.8	7.2	9.4	7.7
Signals	0.8	2.4	1.3	2.4	1.1	2.2	0.3	2.5	0.1	2.4
Victoria										
Rolling stock	11.3	7.0	0.4	7.0	0.4	6.9	1.1	6.5	0.7	6.7
Track	0.8	2.6	6.7	1.9	2.6	2.3	5.6	2.6	9.9	3.1
Signals	0.0	1.2	0.2	1.3	0.1	1.4	0.1	1.3	0.2	1.3
Network										
Rolling stock	4.1	0.0	5.9	0.0	3.7	0.0	0.5	0.0	5.8	0.0
Track	38.1	0.0	16.5	0.0	6.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	14.5	0.0
Signals	1.9	0.0	1.1	0.0	1.0	4.0	0.5	3.6	2.8	3.5
Asset Type										
Rolling stock	253.8	68.5	64.5	67.4	54.4	66.9	52.8	69.9	51.2	78.3
Track	59	49.8	105.7	43	68.1	42.9	65.2	40.7	87.5	45.8
Signalling	31.5	20.7	22.3	21.2	17.7	22.7	19.2	23.3	27.7	24.1
Total	244.4	139.0	192.5	131.6	140.2	132.5	137.1	134.0	166.4	148.2

Notes:
1. Figures exclude investment undertaken under the Jubilee Line Extension Project
2. Figures exclude ALSTOM PFI leasing charge
3. Network figures are the projects which span more than one line

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on *(a)* train, *(b)* signal and *(c)* track failures for each line of the London Underground since May 1997. [100948]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* This is an operational matter for London Underground. However, I understand that the following numbers summarise the failures under the headings requested for passenger journeys (to provide the breakdown would incur disproportionate expense):

Service disruption due to failures in:	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]
Rolling stock	14,873	18,088	20,159	8,067
Signal/points	2,323	2,827	2,756	1,111
Other track	1,007	907	869	402

[1] 24 weeks only

London Underground Limited's data collection year covers 1 April to 31 March. The 1999–2000 figures represent 24 weeks to 18 September 1999 only.

This is in a period when the general trend of train kilometres per year is increasing.

	Million
1996–97	58.6
1997–98	62.1
1998–99	61.2
1999–2000[1]	29.5

[1] 24 weeks only

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will break down the £3 billion efficiency savings identified in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report about PPP and London Underground. [103564]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The saving that PricewaterhouseCoopers identified in their briefing note—£4.5 billion in total over the first 15 years of the PPP, once financing costs are taken into account—assumes that the private sector PPP infrastructure companies will bring an efficiency improvement of 20 per cent.

This is considered to be a conservative estimate, based on what London Underground and their advisers believe the PPP process could deliver, and the scale of efficiency savings that have been delivered previously when the

financing and management of similar infrastructure programmes have been transferred from the public to private sectors.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the recent developments on the London underground public private partnership. [104003]

Mr. Hill: I am confident that the public-private partnership—publicly owned, publicly run, and properly financed—is the best way to deliver the improved underground system London needs.

London Transport is today launching a public-private partnership for the sub-surface lines (Circle, District, Hammersmith and City, Metropolitan, East London lines). A notice inviting expressions of interest from prospective bidders will appear shortly in the "Official Journal of the European Communities".

London Transport is also today inviting expressions of interest in a new public-private partnership for the future management of London Underground's non-operational property estate and for property which is surplus to the requirements of the operational railway.

This public-private partnership comprises the disposal of some surplus, non-operational properties, allied to long-term contracts for the provision of property management services and for the future development of non-operational property. Non-operational property includes commercially let property outside the boundaries of the operational railway, car parks, railway arches, office buildings, development sites and areas made available for the generation of non-fare income (e.g. shops, commercial advertising, vending and cash machines) within the operational boundary.

This partnership would enable London Underground to arrange for its non-operational property portfolio more efficiently and to concentrate on its core task of providing transport services throughout the capital. Together with the public private partnerships for the sub-surface and deep tube lines, it will deliver better station facilities and real improvements for passengers.

It is envisaged that negotiations for the partnership will be concluded in line with the sub-surface and deep tube line public- private partnerships.

Pursuant to the answers of 13 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 212W and 12 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns 154–55W, I understand from London Transport that their expenditure on external consultants from 20 March 1998 (the date of the Government's announcement) to 13 November 1999 for work on the PPP and restructuring London Underground was £48.06 million. The Underground PPP proposals are expected to generate £8 billion new investment in the Underground over the next 15 years.

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the public sector comparator that is being developed for the London Underground Public Private Partnership. [104064]

Mr. Hill: We are developing a Public Sector Comparator to show how much it would cost if a wholly public sector London Underground were to deliver the outputs that will be specified under the public- private partnership contracts. We will only enter into the PPP if bids demonstrate best value when compared against this benchmark.

We will publish the methodology underlying the Public Sector Comparator before contracts for the London Underground public-private partnership are signed. The comparative cash values of the Comparator will then be released after negotiations have been completed. To publish these results any earlier would expose the taxpayer's negotiating position and jeopardise our chances of getting best value.

Foreign Aircraft (Millennium)

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 603–4W, if he will make a further statement relating to foreign aircraft operating to the United Kingdom over the millennium period. [104084]

Mr. Hill: My Department has now received confirmation that aircraft operated by Gulf Air will be free from any Y2K safety related risk. Information has also been received from Southern Aviation (Zambia) advising that the airline will not be operating to the UK over the millennium period. Accordingly, my Department will not be taking any action to suspend permits to either airline to operate to the UK over the millennium period.

My Department will closely monitor the situation over the millennium period and, in the event of any unexpected Y2K safety related problems emerging, will take all necessary steps to ensure that safety is not compromised.

Ladbroke Grove

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 63W, concerning Ladbroke Grove, what was the relevance of railway privatisation to the answer and to the question and to which sentences in the answer it related; and what references to the rail layout at Ladbroke Grove or the safety rules relevant to it or to its operational use were referred to Ministers' offices between May 1997 and the day of the Ladbroke Grove crash. [103009]

Mr. Hill: The privatisation reference was to make explicit the implicit point that a long process which started under British Rail ownership continued under other ownership. On the second point, there have been no references to Ministers. Ministers have no involvement in the statutory approval process for track layout or safety rules. They are the responsibility of the independent Health and Safety Commission and Executive and Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate.

A12 Link Road

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the fully staged incident involving all the emergency services was carried out on the A12 Hackney to M11 link road; what consideration was given to the possibility of such an incident being in a tunnel; what was the outcome; and if he will make a statement. [102972]

Mr. Hill: As the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State advised in her answer of 23 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 404–05W, a successful incident exercise was held in the George Green tunnel on 28 May 1999 involving the Fire Brigade. It was intended to hold an incident exercise with all three emergency services before the tunnel was opened, but unfortunately this did not prove possible.

Holding an exercise now that the road is opened could be highly disruptive. Discussions are continuing with the emergency services to agree the form and timing of a full exercise. I am pressing for this to be held at the earliest opportunity.

Environment Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the outcome of the Environment Council held in Brussels on 13 and 14 December; and if he will make a statement. [103020]

Mr. Meacher: I represented the UK at the Environment Council in Brussels on 13 December 1999, accompanied by Sarah Boyack, Scottish Executive Minister for the Environment and Transport. Three common positions were agreed, along with one set of Council Conclusions.

Agreement was achieved on a Recommendation on minimum standards for environmental inspections in member states, and will apply to environmental inspections of installations regulated under Community law. This will help improve standards of environmental protection and contribute to the effective implementation and enforcement of Community law. A common position was also reached on the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive, which requires an assessment of the environmental effects of certain plans and programmes prepared and/or adopted by public authorities.

Ministers discussed several air quality measures and reached agreement on one, establishing limit values for carbon monoxide and benzene in ambient air, to be achieved by 2005 and 2010 respectively. These will provide a high level of protection for public health and the environment and are in line with those adopted by the World Health Organisation in 1996. Agreement on an amendment of the 1998 Large Combustion Plant Directive was not reached. The Commission proposal sets limit values for emissions from new plant. Council could broadly agree to that proposal, but was divided over the suggestion from some member states of extending the directive's requirements to pre-1987 plants. Further negotiations on this, in parallel with those on the National Emission Ceilings Directive, are likely to be continued by the forthcoming Portuguese Presidency. The Presidency also reported on progress on the proposed National Emission Ceilings Directive and a related air quality directive setting target values for ozone in ambient air.

Council Conclusions on the forthcoming negotiations on a proposed Biosafety Protocol set out the EU's negotiating position for the extraordinary Conference of the Parties taking place in Montreal in January and emphasised the importance of reaching agreement. The recent World Trade Organisation talks in Seattle were discussed over lunch, along with the environmental consequences of the Kosovo conflict and the outcome of the Helsinki European Council.

Further reports to Council were given by the Commission on their proposed work programme for 2000, the review of chemicals legislation initiated in 1998, and its Global Assessment of the 5th Environment Action Programme, on which there was a brief exchange of views.

Fuel Poverty

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the contribution of his Department towards eliminating fuel poverty. [103185]

Mr. Meacher: The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) provides grants for energy efficiency improvements in the homes of people on benefits, the disabled and the over-60s. On 29 September 1999 the Deputy Prime Minister announced that the scheme is being radically improved. The New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (New HEES) will provide complete packages of insulation and heating improvements up to a maximum grant of £2,000, compared to the current maximum of £315. Installations will start in June 2000. In the first two years New HEES is expected to help 460,000 households at a cost of £260 million. These households should be substantially moved away from fuel poverty.

We have also released substantial additional funds to help improve our housing stock; in total some £5 billion is being made available over the lifetime of this Parliament for investment in housing. We estimate that around one third of the money is likely to lead directly or indirectly to improvements in energy efficiency.

The Government have introduced a wide range of programmes to tackle low income and poor energy efficiency, which are the main causes of fuel poverty, as well as the liberalisation of the energy markets which has lead to significant falls in the cost of keeping warm. An inter-ministerial group, chaired jointly by the Minister for Energy and my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, has been set up to consider the impact of all these initiatives on fuel poverty. The group will seek to develop a more accurate picture of the extent of the problem, how quickly it can be addressed, and at what cost, so that a target date can be set for the elimination of fuel poverty in England.

Some of the policy initiatives in this area, such as the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, are devolved functions. Therefore a target date for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would be a matter for the respective bodies.

Bascule Bridge, Lowestoft

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what is the frequency of the maintenance regime for the bascule bridge on the A12 at Lowestoft; and what is the annual cost; [103167]

(2) how many times the bascule bridge on the A12 at Lowestoft has malfunctioned in the last 10 years; [103166]

(3) what was the previous use of the bascule bridge on the A12 at Lowestoft before it was installed in 1974. [103168]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for the Highways Agency and I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Bob Blizzard, dated 21 December 1999:

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Keith Hill, has asked me to write in response to your recent written Parliamentary Questions relating to the Bascule Bridge on the A12 in Lowestoft, Suffolk.

Records kept by Associated British Ports, who are the Highways Agency's maintaining agents for the Bascule Bridge, show there have been 50 malfunctions in an estimated 24,000 operations in the last 10 years.

Associated British Ports carry out weekly inspections of the Bascule Bridge. The A12 is closed overnight on four occasions annually, once per quarter, to allow routine maintenance work to be carried out. The annual budget for operating and maintenance for 1999/2000 is £223,250.00 inclusive of VAT.

The Bascule Bridge was a new structure, constructed in 1974 to replace a swing bridge owned and operated by the British Transport Docks Board.

If you would like further information please contact Simon Amor, the Route Manager for the A12, telephone 01234 796173.

Old Vehicles

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the level of air pollution caused by emissions from vehicles which are more than 25 years old. [103156]

Mr. Hill: Vehicles over 25 years old, although manufactured to much less stringent emission standards than vehicles today, are estimated to make only a small contribution to total emissions from road transport, due to their low numbers and limited mileage. The table provides estimates of the contribution of cars in this category for three key pollutants, using the methodology employed in the National Atmospheric Emission Inventories.

Pollutant	*Estimated contribution of cars over 25 years old to overall emissions from road transport in 1998*
NOx	0.7%
PM_{10}	0.4%
CO	1.3%

Green Ministers Committee

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what issues will be on the agenda of the next meeting of the Green Ministers Committee. [103069]

Mr. Meacher: Three meetings of the Committee have been arranged for 2000, but the first is not until 16 March. The agenda has therefore not yet been agreed, but I am sure that, among other things, we will want to consider progress against the work programme set out in our annual report "Greening Government—First Annual Report of the Green Ministers Committee 1998–99", published in July 1999.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Green Ministers Committee will discuss the progress of the New Deal Environment Task Force. [103068]

Mr. Meacher: The Committee has a programme of three meetings in 2000, but the first of these is not until 16 March. We do not therefore yet have agendas set for the meetings, although there are some issues, such as progress against our work programme, that I am sure we will want to discuss. The Committee takes one general cross-cutting theme at each of its meetings and has in the past considered issues such as biodiversity and green taxes. It is possible that the New Deal Environment Task Force might feature on a future agenda. The Government have taken steps to evaluate the impact of the Task Force, but the analysis is not yet available.

MOT Testing Stations

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) which MOT testing stations are on a final warning from the Vehicle Inspectorate; [103128]

(2) which garages have lost their licence to carry out MOT tests in each of the past five years. [103129]

Mr. Hill: A warning is issued to Authorised Examiners for shortcomings in the testing requirements, but the standard of testing remains acceptable within the scheme. It would be inappropriate, therefore, to release details of warnings issued. When an Authorised Examiner is withdrawn from the MOT testing scheme, they are required to remove all signs and documentation connected with the MOT scheme which gives a clear indication that the garage is not authorised to carry out MOT tests. Authorised Examiners cannot normally reapply for authorisation within a period of five years. To publish the identities of Authorised Examiners withdrawn from the scheme could be prejudicial to any of their other business interests unconnected with the MOT testing scheme and therefore a list of those withdrawn from the scheme is not published. There are about 18,500 private garages authorised as MOT testing stations. The number of Authorised Examiners withdrawn from the scheme in each of the past five years and the number of warnings issued in the same period are shown in the table.

	Authorised examiners withdrawn	*Authorised examiners warned*
1998–99	143	1,058
1997–98	141	1,401
1996–97	181	1,571
1995–96	167	1,333
1994–95	135	1,338

Water Industry Redundancies

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the total job losses *(a)* in England and Wales and *(b)* in Scotland arising from redundancies in the water industry; and if he will make a statement. [103138]

Mr. Meacher: In respect of England and Wales, I refer the right hon. Member to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on 27 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 871–72W.

The water industry in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

Water Quality (Mersey Basin)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to improve water quality in the Mersey Basin; and what guidance he has given to *(a)* the Water Regulator and *(b)* North-West Water on the sewage works at Bolton, Eccles, Ellesmere Port, Sale and Wigan. [103390]

Mr. Meacher: I refer my hon. Friend to the response I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 167–69W, in which I announced my final guidance to the Director General of Ofwat on the environmental objectives which the water industry would be required to meet between 2000 and 2005. North-West Water was one of the seven water and sewerage companies for which I confirmed that the entire agreed investment programme should be completed by March 2005. This will encompass substantial improvements to the quality of river and coastal sewage discharges and to combined sewer overflows in the Mersey Basin.

In addition, improvement schemes for Bolton, Eccles, Ellesmere Port, Sale and Wigan sewage treatment works will receive further study in terms of their costs and benefits before they proceed, as recommended by the Director General. I have asked the Environment Agency to explore in more detail the benefits of the remaining schemes and to set them out in a way which will allow Ministers to judge these against improved information on costs from Ofwat and the companies concerned.

Street Works

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 15 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 187W, on utilities' standards of compliance, if he will quantify the shortfall in utilities compliance with the statutory code of practice on reinstatement of highways and footways. [103579]

Mr. Hill: There are no central records of street works reinstatements or of inspections of works. So far as individual sites are concerned, it is for the undertaker concerned to put right any defects in reinstating the street that may have occurred. Such defects are likely to be discovered as the result of street works inspections by the local highway authority, who have powers under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 to require remedial works to be carried out at the undertaker's expense.

The research project carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory, referred to in my answer of 15 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 187W, examined only a sample of reinstatements undertaken mostly during the mid-1990s. While this showed where improvements needed to be made, it is not possible to extrapolate from it reliable figures for reinstatement defects for the country as a whole.

If there is any particular street works issue that has prompted this question, I suggest that my hon. Friend might care to write to me about it.

Land Use Policies

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the further development of *(a)* regional and *(b)* local land use planning policies. [103618]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The report "Modernising Planning—A Progress Report", which was published earlier this year, summarised the Government's programme for improving the land use planning system, both as regards the processes involved and the policies which apply. A copy is available on the DETR website (http://www.detr.gov.uk). Good progress is being made. A draft revise of the Planning Policy Guidance note on Transport (PPG13) was published for consultation on 18 October. The revised version of PPG12 (Development Plans) was published on 14 December. The final revised versions of the PPGs on Regional Planning (PPG11) and on Housing (PPG3) are expected to be published in the new year.

Manchester Metro

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with the Passenger Transport Authority on plans to extend the Manchester Metrolink throughout Greater Manchester. [103620]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend has met members of the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority on several occasions during the past year to discuss possible extensions to the Manchester Metrolink.

Sea Sewage Outfalls

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the locations of the long sea sewage outfalls still in use around the shores of the United Kingdom. [103381]

Mr. Mullin: Long sea outfalls have generally been envisaged where sewage received no more than primary treatment before discharge to coastal waters. Some discharges to English coastal waters have been designed to incorporate long sea outfalls, but this is a matter for individual sewerage undertakers and there is no centrally held list. However, the Government's announcements on 23 September 1998 and 1 March 1999 on investment in the water industry introduced a requirement that all wastewater discharges from communities greater than 2,000 population would receive a minimum of secondary treatment. Within the context of this policy, wastewater long sea outfalls are less significant, since secondary treatment provides a high level of environmental protection, whatever the length of the outfall.

Wastewater disposal in the remainder of the United Kingdom is a matter for devolved administrations.

Wildlife

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the local Wildlife Sites Review Group will report; and if he will make a statement. [103859]

Mr. Mullin: My officials have set up the Local Sites Review Group, which comprises a wide range of interested bodies to consider the issues associated with the identification, protection and management of local wildlife sites. The Group is aiming to report its conclusions early next year.

Leasehold

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he plans to include provisions relating to public sector leaseholders in his legislation to reform leasehold law. [103584]

Mr. Mullin: Many of the proposed reforms which my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning, announced on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 345W, would apply to both public and private sector leaseholders. The proposals to require landlords to consult leaseholders on proposed improvements, and to allow leaseholders to challenge the cost of these at leasehold valuation tribunals would be of particular benefit to public sector leaseholders.

We are also announcing this week two further measures to help public sector leaseholders with high service charges. We will extend the existing Directions requiring local authorities to reduce service charges to include works carried out under the Private Finance Initiative. We will consult local authorities on a proposal to allow them to charge lower interest rates on service charge debts. At present they have to charge a rate set by my Department, but several authorities have informed us they could charge lower rates and still cover their costs.

These are in addition to other measures that we have already taken to help leaseholders of social landlords. They include issuing directions requiring landlords to reduce charges for some Government funded works which exceed £10,000 per leaseholder in any five year period, and providing financial assistance to social landlords to help them reduce charges or buy back flats which leaseholders want to sell.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Leasehold Advisory Service is able to advise public sector leaseholders; and if it employs anyone with specific knowledge of public sector leaseholders' issue. [103585]

Mr. Mullin: The Leasehold Advisory Service is able to and does provide advice to public sector leaseholders. Two of its staff have considerable experience of the particular problems faced by public sector leaseholders.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given to local authorities concerning the funding of advice services for private sector leaseholders only. [103586]

Mr. Mullin: This Department has issued no specific guidance to local authorities concerning the funding of advice services for leaseholders. However, local authorities are well placed to decide local priorities for spending, and are accountable to the local electorate for their decisions.

Housing Stock

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is towards indemnities underwriting unforeseen major works on the sale or transfer of local authority housing stock. [103583]

Mr. Mullin: The local authority and acquiring landlord are required to carry out a comprehensive stock condition survey before a housing transfer takes place. The Department would not therefore expect a local authority to underwrite unforeseen major works to the housing stock post-transfer.

Housing Need (London)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the current extent of housing need in London. [103613]

Mr. Mullin: The London Research Centre are currently undertaking a research project on this subject.

Homelessness

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what account he will take of the effect of the judgment in Regina *v.* the London Borough of Newham ex parte Aurura Sacupima and Others in the measures he proposes to take to assist London boroughs to house homeless people within their boundaries. [103617]

Mr. Mullin: The judgment in the case of Aurura Sacupima and Others ex parte the London Borough of Newham is one of a number of issues that will be taken into account in considering what measures can be proposed to ease the current shortage of affordable accommodation in London.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he proposes to take to reduce the number of people living in temporary accommodation in London. [103615]

Mr. Mullin: The Government recently announced a £613 million package of capital resources for investment in housing by London boroughs in 2000–01. This represents a 54 per cent. increase over 1999–2000 and accords with spending plans arising from the Comprehensive Spending Review. The additional resources will enable London boroughs to reduce the number of people living in temporary accommodation by increasing the supply of affordable housing in their areas.

In addition, the Government are supporting the Association of London Government's London Housing Partnership initiative to set aside £20 million of London borough's increased housing capital allocations to enable the problem of homelessness and temporary accommodation to be approached on a pan-London basis.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the factors contributing to current shortages of low-cost accommodation in London. [103614]

Mr. Mullin: The current shortage of affordable housing in London is due to the combined effect of a number of factors including:

Recent net increases in London's population, with those moving in tending to be younger and seeking economic opportunities;

A reduction in the supply of privately rented accommodation as landlords opt to sell to take advantage of rising house prices in London;

A fall in turnover of social housing as social tenants are less able to purchase in the private sector;

A reduction in the amount of socially rented accommodation through the Right to Buy, less development by registered social landlords than in recent years and short-term reductions as a result of regeneration activity.

Officials continue to monitor the situation closely.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he proposes to allocate to tackle shortages of affordable housing in London in addition to the funding currently allocated through the Housing Investment Programme. [103616]

Mr. Mullin: A total of £275 million will be provided through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme for the provision of additional accommodation by registered social landlords (RSLs) in London in 2000–01; the announcement of allocations to local authority areas will be made in February. Increases in the supply of affordable housing will also be funded through local authorities housing capital programmes and can be achieved in a variety of different ways. The 2000–01 Housing Investment Programme (HIP) allocations to London Boroughs announced earlier this month included an earmarked £20 million for an initiative mainly for purchase and repair of existing properties in and around London. The total HIP allocation for London for 2000–01 (£613 million) is over 50 per cent. more than in 1999–2000.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policies to combat homelessness. [103127]

Mr. Mullin: Shortly after taking office, the Government made secondary legislation to strengthen the position of households accepted as statutorily homeless. This ensures that accommodation must be available for all homeless acceptances for at least two years and that they must be given reasonable preference in the allocation of long-term social housing.

The Government intend to meet their Manifesto commitment to impose a new duty on local authorities to protect those who are homeless through no fault of their own and are in priority need. My Department has set up an official-level sounding board with the local authority associations, Shelter, the Chartered Institute of Housing and other housing organisations, to discuss proposals for further changes to policy on homelessness and the allocation of permanent social housing. Our proposals are still at an early stage, but we shall consult on them widely, in due course.

On 15 December, the Prime Minister launched "Coming in from the Cold", the Government's strategy for tackling rough sleeping. This sets out how the Government intend to meet their target of reducing rough sleeping by two thirds by 2002. Copies are available in the Library.

Standard Spending Assessment

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the standard spending assessment per head of population in the areas covered by Derbyshire Dales District Council and Amber Valley Borough Council. [103726]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The provisional 2000–01 standard spending assessment per head of population figures are:

£

	Amber Valley	*Derbyshire Dales*
District	83	91
Derbyshire County	674	674
Derbyshire Police	54	54
Area	811	819

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate, per pupil, the standard spending assessment for each shire county local education authority, ranked and numbered in descending order, for each of the last five years. [103724]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Tables showing these figures have been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Dennis Dart Buses

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received from the Vehicle Inspectorate on the safety of Dennis Dart buses; what response he has made; if he will establish a formal investigation of Dennis Dart buses; and if he will make a statement. [103751]

Mr. Hill: A report on alleged unintended acceleration in Public Service Vehicles was sent to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions by the Vehicle Inspectorate on 23 August. The Department subsequently asked the Vehicle Inspectorate to provide additional information to widen the scope of the informal investigations. There are no plans to establish any formal investigation of Dennis Dart buses.

Revenue Support Grant

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the revenue support grant per head of population in *(a)* Stoke-on-Trent, *(b)* Kensington and Chelsea, *(c)* Wandsworth, *(d)* Waltham Forest and *(e)* Redbridge. [103622]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The provisional 2000–01 revenue support grant per head of population figures are:

Area	*£ per head*
(a) Stoke-on-Trent	389
(b) Kensington and Chelsea	386
(c) Wandsworth	462
(d) Waltham Forest	592
(e) Redbridge	464

Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 will be fully implemented; and if he will make a statement. [103216]

Mr. Hill: We intend to implement the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 as quickly as possible. We consulted earlier this year, jointly with the Public Carriage Office, on the licensing of private hire vehicle operators in London. Having carefully considered the responses, we intend to conduct a further consultation with draft regulations as early as possible next year. Further consultations, also jointly with the Public Carriage Office, will follow on proposals for regulating private hire drivers and vehicles.

Transport Direct

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much public spending will be allocated to the Transport Direct telephone line; and where it will be based. [103373]

Mr. Hill: The national public transport information system—the Government's White Paper commitment to an integrated system giving journey planning and timetable information over the telephone—is being funded by transport operators and local authorities. Government have provided Supplementary Credit Approvals to local authorities of £1 million in 1998–99 and £3.3 million in 1999–2000 to assist with the capital requirements of the project.

The public will be able to call a single telephone number for routes and timetables for bus, train, coach, metro, tram and ferry. The service is expected to be introduced progressively throughout Great Britain during 2000.

A possible development for the longer term is the availability of tickets by telephone for multi-modal journeys. No decisions on that option have yet been taken.

Business Rates

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of extending the 50 per cent. reduction in business rating available to environmentally friendly sources of electricity generation to the generation of electricity by pumped storage hydro techniques; and if he will make a statement. [103739]

Ms Armstrong: The current regulations prescribing the rateable value of wind and tidal power generators value these at less than other sources of electricity generation. There is no reduction in business rating for environmentally friendly sources of electricity generation.

The next quinquennial revaluation of non-domestic rates will take effect from 1 April 2000. As part of this, the Government is considering the values which it will prescribe for certain industries, including electricity generators. There are no pumped storage schemes in England. Rating valuation in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Conveyancing

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he is taking to help to speed up the house buying process. [103239]

Mr. Mullin: On 11 October we announced our intention to take forward a package of complementary measures aimed at speeding up and improving the home buying and selling process. The package is based on a detailed survey and consultation exercise and studies of experience in other countries. A key proposal is a requirement that before putting a home on the market, the seller or seller's agent should put together a pack of standard documents and information for prospective buyers. This should include copies of title documents, replies to standard buyers' preliminary inquiries, replies to local searches, copies of planning and other consents, copies of warranties and guarantees, a home condition report and a draft contract.

In addition, we want buyers to be better prepared and will be encouraging the wider use of "in principle" mortgage offers. We also want faster mortgage offers and local authority searches and will be asking the service providers to adopt service targets on these. Mortgage lenders are also being asked to provide title deeds within five working days of request and to examine the scope for "chain-breaking" loans. Finally, all the professions and other bodies involved in the home buying and selling process are being encouraged to make better use of advances in information technology to speed up the process.

Council Tax

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to reduce the council tax burden for the lowest bands. [103240]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Help with council tax bills for people on low incomes is already provided through the means-tested council tax benefit system.

We considered the need for changes to the council tax bands in the review which culminated in our 1998 White Paper, "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People". We explained that the council tax was generally working well and that we did not plan to make any fundamental changes to it in the course of this Parliament.

Hedgerows

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is on the control of hedgerows in residential areas; and if he will make a statement. [103241]

Mr. Mullin: We will be considering what more Government might usefully do to help solve the problems caused by nuisance hedges in the light of responses to the consultation paper "High hedges: possible solutions". The options identified there include both voluntary and statutory action.

The consultation paper suggests, however, that adding residential hedges to the list of statutory nuisances in section 79 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (as proposed in the Control of Hedgerows in Residential

Areas Bill) appears unlikely to be more effective than the existing statutory nuisance provisions in controlling residential hedges.

Soil Strategy

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the reasons for delay in the consultation process on his Department's soil strategy; and when the formal consultation document will be published. [103121]

Mr. Mullin: We expect to be able to publish the draft soil strategy for consultation by Easter next year. This is later than we had previously planned. The additional time has been needed to develop the draft, particularly so that it fits within the wider family of sustainable development strategies.

Regional Airports

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the value is of the investment planned over the next five years by the regional airports whose investments are not subject to PSBR restraint. [103906]

Mr. Mullin: The most recently available information relating to planned investment at the local authority airports recently removed from borrowing controls (Humberside, Leeds Bradford, Manchester, Newcastle and Norwich) is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1999–2000	111
2000–01	66
2001–02	87
2002–03	93
2003–04	103

National Air Traffic Service

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what would happen to the proceeds of sales of surplus land or buildings from the current NATS property portfolio after the implementation of a public private partnership. [103910]

Mr. Mullin: NATS currently owns minimal surplus land or buildings. A number of its key sites are leased. Any proceeds from property disposals after the implementation of the proposed public-private partnership would accrue to the company in which the Government will be a significant shareholder.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department has prepared a valuation of the land and facilities currently owned by NATS. [103908]

Mr. Mullin: The majority of land and facilities owned by NATS are small infrastructure sites. No valuation of these has been prepared. A valuation of major sites is under consideration.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the current pension arrangements for NATS staff will be preserved under the proposed PPP. [103904]

Mr. Mullin: NATS staff employed by the company at the time the PPP is established will be entitled to remain in the Civil Aviation Authority Pension Scheme.

Lighting Column Replacement

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will amend the Standard Spending Assessment formula to make lighting column replacement eligible for capital funding under the transport policy programme; and if he will make a statement. [103766]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Other than in exceptional circumstances, the replacement of lighting columns should be treated as revenue expenditure. Provision for this expenditure is made in Standard Spending Assessments and reflected in the distribution of Revenue Support Grant. Capital allocations made on the basis of local transport plans (replacement for the Transport Policies and Programme system) should not be used for the maintenance of lighting columns.

Rail Safety

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received the November monthly report from the HSE on signals passed at danger for the national railway and the London Underground. [104002]

Mr. Hill: I have today placed in the Library the Health and Safety Executive's report for November on Signals Passed at Danger (SPADs) and London Underground's first monthly SPAD report. I propose to put all such future reports in the Library on a monthly basis.

Greater London Authority

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent in the current financial year on preparing for the Greater London Authority. [104007]

Mr. Hill: At the end of September 1999, £2.2. million had been spent by my Department on preparing for the GLA. Further to my answer of 20 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 591W, the cost of arranging the elections for the Mayor and Assembly on 4 May 2000 and for publicity will fall mainly in the last three months of the current financial year.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Research Contracts

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the title of research studies, audits and surveys *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned by his Department for completion in (i) 1999 and (ii) 2000, stating in each case when the results are due to be published. [99629]

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of

publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100153]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Research and Surveys are commissioned by the Analytical Services Division of this Department.

Details of all contracts let as part of the research programme are published in the Department's Research Yearbook; the relevant ones are Yearbooks 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99. Other research studies which have been commissioned (but not yet listed in the yearbook) include:

New Deal for Lone Parents—qualitative follow-up

Secondary analysis of NDLP Phase One—Childcare

BA Staff Attitudes to Security

'ONE' Evaluation

BA Better Government for Older people prototypes

Monitoring Restrictions to Council Tax Benefit

The Changing Role of the Trustee

Evaluation of the Pensions Helpline

Overpayments of HB and CTB

Data and Literature review: ISMI State Provision and Private Insurance

Local Authority Omnibus Survey

Prospects of part-time work: the impact of BTWB.

It is the Department's normal practice to publish all research commissioned as part of its research programme. Publication is governed by standard procedures which mean the research reports are published when they are ready. Contractors are required to submit draft reports on which officials (but not Ministers) provide comments; there is no contractual requirement to include these comments.

Research for DSS Communications Directorate. Research Contracts and their value commissioned by DSS Communication Directorate since May 1997.

	Value
1997–98	
Counter fraud publicity strategy development	49,150
Counter Fraud Tracking research	27,412
Family Credit Advisor Mailing Evaluation	8,906
Lone Parents Omnibus	5,234
Lone Parents Dipstick (Public Opinion)	6,726
Lone Parents Creative Development	9,476
Lone Parents Desk Research	9,729
NDLP Qualitative Research	53,815
Counter Fraud Change of Circumstances	38,587
Counter Fraud Publicity Development	36,319
Winter Fuel Payments Leaflet Omnibus	3,720
Pensions Leaflet Creative Development	20,168
Working Benefits campaign testing of audience reaction	[1]—
Working Benefits test mailshot qualitative research	[1]—
1998–99	
NDLP Strategy Research	41,042
Making Work Pay Pitch Research	37,171
Making Work Pay Tracking Research	65,988
NDLP Pitch Research	41,242
Winter Fuel Payments Pre-Post	38,034
Winter Fuel Leaflet Development	22,731
Pensions Tracking	49,902
NDLP Publicity Evaluation	75,059
Pensioners MIG Pitch Research	66,651
MIG Omnibus	10,316
NDLP Research into mailing	22,006

Research for DSS Communications Directorate. Research Contracts and their value commissioned by DSS Communication Directorate sinc · May 1997.

	Value
1999–2000	
Welfare Reform Strategic Communications	35,908
Winter Fuel Payments Pre-Post	40,972
Internal Communications Desk Research	6,997
Internal Communications Qualitative Research	64,589

[1] Not available—It is not possible to separate out the value of these contracts from the overall work undertaken by the contractor.

The research projects listed were commissioned to develop and evaluate publicity campaigns or to inform other presentational issues. Reports of this sort of research are not usually published but are made available on request. Officials have an opportunity to see reports in draft form in order to check for factual accuracy of information and quality of presentation of the report.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the size of the backlog in processing Disability Living Allowance appeals at Warbreck House, Blackpool. [102639]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is the responsibility of Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Martyn Jones, dated 20 December 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question in which you asked for a statement on the size of the backlog in processing Disability Living Allowance (DLA) appeals at Warbreck House, Blackpool.

The Disability and Carer Benefits Directorate aims to clear 90% of DLA appeals within 60 days. The outstanding number of registered appeals awaiting preparation and issue of a submission of evidence to The Appeals Service (TAS) as at 30 November was 6,628. Of these, 6106 (92%) are within the normal processing period. The remaining 522 (8%) were over the 60 day target period.

There have been delays in processing DLA cases, including appeals, over recent weeks and measures have been introduced to rectify the situation. Staff resources have been diverted from less critical areas of work, and newly recruited staff will have completed their training in January and March. The situation is being closely monitored on a weekly basis.

I hope this is helpful.

State Pension (Age Additions)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate *(a)* the gross cost, *(b)* the savings in means-tested benefits and *(c)* the additional income tax revenue which would result from the introduction in April 2000 of age additions to the basic state pension of £10 for those aged 80 years and over and £5 for those aged 75 to 79 years. [103148]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Full year expenditure and revenue effects of age additions in 2000–01

£ million (+ costs/- savings)

	£10 age addition for over 80s and £5 age addition for 75–79s
Expenditure on Retirement Pension	1,800
Means-tested benefit savings	–600
Additional Income tax	–120

Notes:
1. Estimates for Retirement Pension have been provided by the Government Actuary's Department.
2. Estimates for income tax revenues have been provided by Inland Revenue.
3. Means-tested benefit offsets have been estimated using the 1999–2000 Income Support Simulation and Policy Simulation Models.
4. Estimates are in 1999–2000 prices and are rounded to the nearest £10 million.

Pensions Ombudsman

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the powers of the Pensions Ombudsman to deal with complaints; [103163]

(2) if he will make a statement on the current powers and responsibilities of the Pensions Ombudsman; [103159]

(3) what plans he has to seek amendment of the law to allow class actions by members of the same pension scheme; [103165]

(4) if he will make it his policy to oblige the Pensions Ombudsman to hear oral evidence; [103161]

(5) what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the process by which complainants are reimbursed the costs of bringing their cases before the Pensions Ombudsman; [103164]

(6) which areas of the powers and responsibilities of the Pensions Ombudsman he is reviewing; [103160]

(7) if he will confer on the Pensions Ombudsman comparable powers concerning the admissibility of documents and evidence and standards of proof as employed in courts of law; [103158]

(8) what recent representations he has received from the Pensions Ombudsman concerning additional powers. [103162]

Mr. Rooker: The Pensions Ombudsman provides an easily accessible service by which pension scheme members and those involved in the running of schemes can raise disputes of fact or law and make complaints of maladministration that have resulted in injustice. He can investigate complaints of injustice caused by maladministration and disputes of fact or law brought by members of pension schemes and their spouses and dependants against trustees managers or employers of those schemes. He can also investigate complaints made by employers against trustees or managers or vice versa, or made by the trustees or managers of one scheme against the trustees or managers of another. Further, he is able to investigate disputes of fact or law referred by employers and trustees or managers of the same scheme or disputes between the trustees or managers of different schemes.

The consultation paper "Strengthening the Pensions Framework" contained proposals to clarify and extend the Ombudsman's remit in respect of certain types of complaint or dispute. These proposals were generally welcomed by those who responded to the consultation. It is intended to bring forward provisions to introduce these changes as soon as is practicable.

A recent Court of Appeal ruling (Thomas Edge & Ors *v.* The Pensions Ombudsman & Anor) found the Pensions Ombudsman's power of investigation to be limited to those cases where the interests of others not party to the dispute are not affected.

Compliance with the court's determination has the effect of removing certain cases from the Ombudsman's remit. For instance, if a death benefit has been paid to one person (for example a current partner) by the trustees and not to another (for example the legal spouse) the Pensions Ombudsman could not accept a complaint from the legal spouse as it affects the interests of the recipient of the death benefit (who currently cannot be a party) even though the complaint is about the actions of the trustees.

It also means that if groups of members are affected, their cases cannot be considered. For instance, where a complaint relates to the treatment of surplus assets and concerns all the pensioners and all the active members it would be excluded.

The Pensions Ombudsman raised this issue in the light of the potential impact it could have on the types of cases he can investigate. In order to ensure that the Pensions Ombudsman can continue to deal with the range of cases he had dealt with before the 'Edge' decision, changes are required to the procedures under which he conducts his investigations.

These procedures are amended under provisions contained in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill. These provisions address the restriction on the Pensions Ombudsman's power to investigate and determine a complaint or dispute that affects the interests of those not party to the original complaint or dispute. These will ensure an individual can raise an issue with the Pensions Ombudsman if it affects the interests of a group of members in the same scheme. It will also require that those members have the opportunity to put their point of view. In the case of a group of members, this will be via an appointed representative. In effect, therefore, the procedural changes will establish a mechanism for consideration of group or 'class actions'.

Currently, complainants can have costs reimbursed only for attendance at an oral hearing. This process is adequate when an oral hearing is held to ascertain the facts in a case but might not be sufficient where a complaint or dispute raised intricate issues on which the complaining member might need specialist advice. Without the possibility of access to the resources of their scheme, members may be discouraged from taking valid complaints or disputes to the Pensions Ombudsman because of an inability to finance the required advice. There is, therefore, also provision in the Child Support,

Pensions and Social Security Bill to order that legal costs be met from the resources of the scheme. It is anticipated that such orders will be made only for complex cases that involve a number of parties.

The Pensions Ombudsman holds oral hearings where the facts of a case are in dispute or where there is an issue concerning the accuracy of evidence. To require mandatory oral hearings in all instances would lengthen the process, make it more costly and adversarial for those involved and, therefore, we do not propose to change the law in this way.

We also do not propose to confer on the Pensions Ombudsman powers concerning the admissibility of documents and evidence and standards of proof comparable to those employed in courts of law. This would run counter to the principle that the Pensions Ombudsman provides an informal process by which individuals can seek to have their grievances addressed.

Pensioner Households (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner households there are in the London Borough of Wandsworth. [103171]

Mr. Rooker: The number of pensioner households in the London Borough of Wandsworth in 1991 was 30,274.

Notes:

1. Figures shown are the number of households with one or more residents aged over state pension age.

2. Figures are taken from the 1991 Census. Later figures are not available.

Tribunal Appeals

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department paid between *(a)* May 1997 and April 1998 and *(b)* May 1998 and April 1999, in backdated claims arising from successful independent tribunal appeals against DSS adjudication decisions. [103767]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Secondary Class Sizes

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils of secondary age in England were in classes of 40 or above for the last year for which figures are available; and what percentage of the total number of secondary age pupils in England this figure represents. [101682]

Ms Estelle Morris: In January 1999, there were 1,900 pupils reported as being taught in one teacher classes of 40 or more in maintained secondary schools. This represents less than 0.07 per cent. of all pupils in these classes, and includes Physical Education lessons and classes where another adult was present.

Grammar Schools

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many complaints have been received by his Department regarding campaigning literature *(a)* supporting the retention of grammar schools and *(b)* supporting the abolition of grammar schools, stating (i) the date when the complaint was first received, (ii) the date when a final decision was announced and (iii) whether the complaint was upheld. [101702]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The information requested is shown in the following table.

All complaints are considered by officials at the Department for Education and Employment. So far officials have investigated, or are investigating, 16 complaints about campaigns relating to the future of selective admissions to grammar schools. Details of these are included in the following table.

Decisions made by Ministers on complaints about petitions and ballots are in accordance with Section 107 of the Standards and Framework Act 1998, the Ballot Information Code as set out in Schedule 4 to the Education (Grammar Schools Ballots) Regulations 1998, and the Guidance to Petitions and Ballots.

Area	*Date of complaint*	*Date of decision*	*Outcome*
Complaints about anti-grammar school campaign literature			
Ripon	26 October 1999	2 November 1999	Not upheld
Trafford	12 October 1999	Ongoing	—
Complaints about pro-grammar school campaign literature			
Kent	8 September 1999	18 October 1999	Not upheld
Kent	14 September 1999	Ongoing	—
Kent	14 September 1999	2 November 1999	Not upheld
Kent	18 October 1999	19 October 1999	Not upheld
Kent	20 October 1999	2 November 1999	Not upheld
Kent	20 October 1999	2 November 1999	Not upheld
Kent	22 October 1999	2 November 1999	Not upheld
Ripon	24 September 1999	Ongoing	Not upheld, but the Department is engaged in providing ongoing advice during the petition period
Ripon	25 October 1999	29 October 1999	Not upheld
Ripon	3 November 1999	11 November 1999	Not upheld, but the Department is engaged in providing ongoing advice during the petition period
Ripon	4 November 1999	Ongoing	—
Sutton	15 November 1999	Ongoing	—
Tafford	3 October 1999	Ongoing	—
Tafford	13 October 1999	Ongoing	—

New Deal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the average total net cost or gain to the Exchequer of *(a)* an individual finding sustained unsubsidised employment of 13 weeks or more after leaving the gateway, *(b)* an individual finding sustained unsubsidised employment of 13 weeks or more after completing one of the options, *(c)* an individual on follow-through, *(d)* an individual leaving the gateway to be transferred to another benefit or to return to jobseeker's allowance and *(e)* an individual completing and leaving an option to be transferred to another benefit or to return to jobseeker's allowance. [102115]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* There is a comprehensive evaluation programme in place for the new deal for young unemployed which will be addressing issues such as this. The impact of the new deal on an individual's employability at each stage is one of the evaluation answers. However, I am advised that precise weighting of the respective benefit of each stage is likely to be difficult. Most evaluation is still in progress and is yet to report. Early evidence suggests a positive effect on outflows of young people from unemployment into jobs. Further quantitative evaluation on the impact of new deal for young unemployed will be published shortly and will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people have gained employment through the new deal in each constituency. [102589]

Ms Jowell: We plan to produce and publish summary statistics on the new deal for young people, for every Parliamentary constituency, in the new year. These will demonstrate our good progress towards meeting our Manifesto commitment of 250,000 young people into jobs under the new deal for young people.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have joined the new deal in the (i) Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, (ii) Middlesbrough, (iii) Redcar, (iv) Stockton North, (v) Stockton South and (vi) Hartlepool constituencies since the national launch. [102481]

Ms Jowell: To the end of September 1999 the numbers of people who have joined the new deals for young people and long-term unemployed people aged 25 or over for each constituency are as follows:

	New deal	
	18–24	*25 plus*
Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland	896	572
Middlesbrough	1,632	1,037
Redcar	1,114	631
Stockton North	1,055	292
Stockton South	712	152
Hartlepool	1,007	284

It is encouraging that over 2,800 people have found jobs through these new deals and that we are well on target to meet our commitment of helping 250,000 young people into jobs.

Co-operatives

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to encourage the growth of co-operatives. [102483]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Government welcome all types of business organisation, including co-operatives, which can meet the needs of employers, individuals and customers. This reflects the Government's key objectives of achieving high and stable levels of overall growth and employment, and a flexible and adaptable labour market.

The UK's low inflation and stable macroeconomy, and its policies to promote competition, innovation and enterprise, aim to foster the conditions in which new jobs can be created, whether by co-operatives or by other types of organisation.

Through the new deal, we are also forging partnerships with a wide range of non-government organisations, including community based organisations and other intermediaries who can co-operate in the task of helping jobless people back to work. A £5 million fund has also been established to support intermediary organisations in eleven cities, who can demonstrate they have effective links with employers and can help jobless people into work.

Performance

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of school and college performance in 1999. [103195]

Jacqui Smith: Full information on the performance in 1999 of schools and FE sector colleges in England was published recently in this year's school and college performance tables. The results in the tables show a clear trend of continuing improvements in the GCSE and GNVQ results of pupils in secondary schools and in the achievements of students in schools and FE sector colleges in GCE A levels and other advanced qualifications. The tables also show substantial and very welcome increases in the proportion of pupils at the end of their primary schooling reaching the level expected of them in National Curriculum tests.

The performance tables show what can be achieved by committed teachers and pupils, supported by effective national strategies. There is, of course, still much to do to reach our national targets for achievements in GCSEs and National Curriculum assessment by 2002, but we have the right foundations in place.

Free School Meals

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the additional cost of extending access to free school meals to all primary school children. [103145]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on the cost of provision of free school meals is not collected separately and it is therefore not possible to provide the information requested.

Student Loans

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish *(a)* the recommended

targets set and *(b)* the actual outcomes achieved by the Student Loans Company for processing loan claims in 1998. [102983]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The target set for the Student Loans Company for processing loan claims in 1998–99 academic year under the new loans scheme was

> "to pay 100 per cent. of loan applications within 14 calendar days of receiving an application form excluding *(a)* any excess time (beyond two working days) that it takes HEIs to submit eligibility certificates; and *(b)* any time taken to receive additional information from borrowers or HEIs".

For the old loans scheme, the target set for 1998–99 was

> "to pay 100 per cent of loans within 21 days of receiving an actionable application form, excluding *(a)* any excess time (beyond two working days) that it takes HEIs to submit eligibility certificates and borrowers to receive and return credit agreements and *(b)* to obtain additional or corrected information from borrowers or HEIs."

The outturn figures for 1998–99 AY are not yet available. In 1997–98 AY, the Company achieved an outturn of 99.3 per cent. against a target of 98 per cent. of loans to be paid within 21 days.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the *(a)* number of students in receipt of student loans and *(b)* value of student loans to be paid, in (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–2001 and (iii) 2001–02, [102878]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* On the basis of the number of students who have taken out loans this year, we estimate that in the region of 700,000 UK students will take out loans to a UK value of £1,400 million this financial year. Figures for future years are not yet available.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students have not received in full their entitlement to student loans this autumn; how many have received partial advances; and if he will make a statement on the overall operation of the student support system. [103120]

Mr. Wicks: There have been 381,000 applications from students for a loan. 374,000 cheques have been issued to students to date, the remaining applications, which are nearly all from students who applied only recently, are being processed, half of these have failed validation checks. Students are able to borrow up to their full entitlement to support on two occasions during the academic year if they choose to do so. It is not possible to identify the number of applicants who have so far applied for less than their full entitlement.

All parties involved in the provision of Student Support have worked well to implement the new arrangements effectively.

ONE Service

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the first qualitative evaluation of the ONE service pilots will be available; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [103004]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The first qualitative results from the ONE evaluation should be available in autumn 2000. Once received, final versions of the reports take around eight weeks to publish. Copies of the reports will be placed in the Library.

Level 3 Qualifications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on UCAS's proposals for a unified tariff of Level 3 qualifications. [102920]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The tariff of points for entry to higher education is constructed by UCAS, which is an independent organisation. The UCAS board recently announced changes to the tariff.

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, while welcoming some aspects of the Tariff which are expected to be supportive of the "Qualifying for Success" reforms, is not convinced of the need to change the ratio between the A and E grades from 5:1 to 3:1. He has said he will consider the issue further in discussions with UCAS.

Home Teaching

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide a breakdown by local education authority of the number of children who are taught at home by their parents; and what plans he has to institute a national register and to make it a requirement that parents who plan to teach their children at home inform the local education authority. [103571]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 21 November 1999]:* Information on the number of children educated at home by their parents is not held centrally. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no current plans to introduce a national register of home-educated children. Home educated pupils can be removed from a school roll only where the school has received written notification from the parent that the pupil is receiving education otherwise than at school. The relevant local education authority is under a duty to monitor the education provided to home-educated children and to enforce school attendance where it is inadequate.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what mechanisms exist for ensuring that the educational attainment and progress of children who are taught at home by their parents are adequately monitored to ensure that children are not educationally disadvantaged. [103572]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* Under the 1996 Education Act, parents can opt to educate their children otherwise than at school. In such circumstances, local education authorities have a duty to ensure that the education provided is suitable to age, aptitude and ability and any special educational needs the child may have. It is for education authorities to decide how to monitor these arrangements. In cases where the education being provided is deemed not suitable, LEAs can apply to the courts for an Education Supervision Order, which could allow home education to continue with supervision, or they can try to obtain a School Attendance Order.

LEA Management

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those consultants who have been engaged by his Department to advise on the management of individual local education authorities following Ofsted reports on them; how many companies have bid for each contract; what the criteria were against which the successful bidders were selected; and what is the total cost of these consultancy contracts. [103575]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* Six consultancy firms have been awarded framework contracts by the DfEE to undertake work in relation to LEA intervention. These are: PricewaterhouseCoopers; KPMG; The Office for Public Management; Lorien; Capita; and Arthur Andersen/ Birmingham LEA.

Under European Union procurement rules, we conducted a rigorous competition to establish framework contracts with consultancy firms. Framework arrangements allow the Department to appoint consultants quickly following an Ofsted report, without the need for a separate procurement exercise for each intervention case. 97 consultancy firms originally expressed an interest in the work and, following the competition, frameworks were established with six of them. In order to ensure maximum value for money, we have also held mini-competitions to let particular contracts.

The criteria for selecting the consultants included a proven track record in: understanding the nature of services provided by LEAs; working with service providers to improve service delivery standards; handling complex contract and project management arrangements; and preparing service related specifications.

The estimated overall cost of ongoing consultancy in Hackney, Liverpool, Islington, Leicester City and Haringey is £2.7 million including VAT. The costs are generally split between DfEE and the LEA concerned.

Barnet Schools

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 227W, what was the proportion of out-of-borough pupils attending primary and secondary schools in Barnet in each of the last five years. [103008]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* Information on the number of out-of-borough pupils educated in schools in Barnet is not collected in the form requested.

The numbers of pupils educated in Barnet by school type is derived from returns made by schools to the Department in January each year. A separate survey collects information on the overall number of out-of-borough pupils in schools but these figures are not collected by school type and are therefore not directly comparable with the January figures.

Funding (Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which educational institutions will benefit from funding under the capital guidelines for Lancashire for 2000–01. [103229]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* It is for Lancashire County Council to decide how best to use the over £6.5 million of credit approvals, which was allocated to it under the 2000–01 Education Annual Capital Guideline to meet local need. That said, part of the allocation was made in recognition of the need for 536 additional secondary places in the Clithetoe and Poulton/Thornton Cleveleys area; part in recognition of improvement and replacement works that are needed at all maintained schools; and part in recognition of commitments arising from the projects supported under the Annual Capital Guideline.

Sixth Formers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils in maintained schools sixth forms are unable to qualify either for *(a)* child benefit, *(b)* other social security benefits and *(c)* student support. [103235]

Mr. Wicks: The information asked for on child and social security benefits is not collected by the Department and cannot be supplied. This Department's School Access Fund is making £6 million available in 1999–2000 and will provide support to about 15,000 post-16 pupils in sixth forms. In addition, we would expect a similar number to be assisted through discretionary payments made by local authorities. In addition we have made £100 million available over the period 1999–2002 to pilot Education Maintenance Allowances to help young people in all forms of education, including sixth forms.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the annual average cost of full-time education of persons aged 16 to 19 years in *(a)* maintained school sixth forms, *(b)* sixth form colleges and *(c)* other further education colleges in each of the last five years together with his projections for the next two years. [103236]

Mr. Wicks: It is not possible to give average annual costs for 16 to 19-year-olds in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and other further educational colleges because data on expenditure are not collected in a way that allows the calculation to be made.

The table gives estimates of the public funding costs of a successful level 3 qualification package (i.e. A levels, Advanced GNVQs and Level 3 NVQs) in school sixth forms and colleges. These are for full-time courses and do not take account of any cross-subsidisation within institutions or other sources of funding (e.g. employers), but do take account of the retention and achievement variation across the two sectors.

Sector	*Funding cost £* [2]	*Index* [3]
1995–96 [1]		
LEA maintained schools	7,060	100
Grant maintained schools	7,110	101
General FE colleges	6,580	93
Sixth form colleges	6,360	90

Sector	Funding cost £[2]	Index[3]
1996–97		
LEA maintained schools	7,380	100
Grant maintained schools	7,630	103
General FE colleges	6,250	85
Sixth form colleges	5,910	80

[1] Methodology changed between 1995–96 and 1996–97; these estimates use the same methodology as for 1996–97
[2] Rounded to the nearest £10
[3] LEA maintained schools = 100

Notes:
1. 1995–96 and 1996–97 are the only two years for which data are available on a comparable basis
2. DfEE do not project unit output funding estimates

The Government are committed to levelling up funding across post-16 routes over time, and have recently announced an additional £1.56 billion for further education over three years to begin to close the historical funding gap.

Maintenance Allowances

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many educational maintenance allowances have been paid to date and at what total cost, in each of the pilot areas; and if he will make a statement. [103237]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is in the table (figures refer to the period up to and including 26 November):

	Current EMA recipients	Total cost to date (£)
Bolton	1,011	109,434.82
Cornwall	1,574	625,480.85
Doncaster	439	107,103.50
Gateshead	925	91,673.00
Greenwich	98	15,383.20
Lambeth	182	25,018.10
Leeds	728	201,285.46
Lewisham	45	6,485.30
Middlesbrough	871	193,144.46
Nottingham	1,087	223,324.50
Oldham	1,186	145,969.33
Southampton	750	159,076.20
Southwark	72	7,716.48
Stoke	912	108,961.08
Walsall	1,006	243,533.58
Total	10,886	2,805,769.48

We are encouraged by the success so far in the overall take-up of EMAs. We have worked alongside our external partners in the 15 pilot areas to ensure the smoothest possible introduction of the pilot scheme. LEAs are still dealing with EMA applications, including a number of cases where additional information is required to complete the assessment. We therefore expect the number of EMA recipients to rise further in the coming months.

An initial evaluation report is due in September 2000. However, early anecdotal evidence suggests that EMAs have helped young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to remain in education when they might otherwise would not have been able to afford to participate. In addition, a number of Institutions have reported improvements in attendance.

EMAs have the potential to make a real difference to the life chances of young people and we are pleased that the pilots have made an encouraging start.

Fee Collection

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the collection by higher education institutions this term of fee contributions from *(a)* students and *(b)* local authorities. [103119]

Mr. Wicks: Higher education institutions are responsible for making arrangements to collect tuition fees from all those students liable to pay them. We have asked institutions to be sensitive and flexible in their collection of the fee contribution and therefore in many cases students will be paying in instalments extending beyond the first term. Local authorities pay the fee contribution for students who fall under the previous arrangements; the Student Loans Company will pay the fee contribution due for students entitled to support from public funds under the current arrangements. In both cases, payment is due to an institution once the continued attendance of each student is confirmed three months after the beginning of the academic year. For the academic year beginning 1 September 1999, such payments from local authorities should in most cases be received by 9 February 2000.

Competitive Tendering

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the number and value of contracts let by his Department since May 1997 to external consultants and advisers for the management of competitive tendering processes. [103608]

Mr. Wills: No contracts to manage competitive tendering processes have been let by the Department since 1997.

Staff Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many staff were seconded from the private sector to his Department in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to the latest date for which figures are available, stating in each case the companies from which staff have been seconded. [103605]

Mr. Wills: Between May 1997 to April 1998, this Department had three secondees from the private sector. They came from Aquemen Services, Glaxo Wellcome and Pannell Kerr Forster Associates.

Between May 1998 to April 1999, we had five secondees—one from Aquemen Services, one from IICL, one from Glaxo Wellcome and two from the BBC.

From May 1999 to date, we have had two secondees—from the Link Group and from Glaxo Wellcome.

Project Charlie

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the Government's plans are for a

further follow-up study of the drug-use attitudes of Project Charlie children; and if these plans include an increase in the size of the sample used previously. [103481]

Jacqui Smith: There are no current plans for a further specific study of Project Charlie. As part of our commitment to the anti-drugs strategy, from next year we will be commissioning the funding, in partnership with others, a longitudinal study on the effectiveness of drug education. The project will aim to establish evidence of the cost-effectiveness and effectiveness of drug education, within the wide PSHE context, in terms of changes in behaviour among young people to resist drug use.

Higher Education Institutions

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the Government's policy is on the relative amounts of funding available for *(a)* single-discipline higher education institutions and *(b)* multi-discipline higher education institutions. [103364]

Mr. Wicks: The Government support diversity within the higher education sector. In its distribution of funding the Higher Education Funding Council for England takes into account the size and range of disciplines in institutions as well as factors directly related to teaching and research and keeps under review those institutions that specialise in a few subjects.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Experience

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the total cost of focus group research carried out by the New Millennium Experience Company; and if he will publish the names of the organisations which carried out the research, the questions put to participants and the results of the research. [98823]

Janet Anderson: Two focus group research projects have been carried out to inform the New Millennium Experience Company's considerations about the positioning and targeting of the Millennium Experience since the Government gave the go-ahead for the project in June 1997. A further two focus group research projects have been undertaken to test reactions of the public to proposals for advertising the Millennium Experience at the Dome. The companies involved in these projects are Hall and Partners, One World Research and Davey Bioletti. The cost of the research is covered within the company's marketing, communications and commercial budget as set out in the company's Annual Report and Financial Statements to 31 March 1999 and published in July 1999. The results of the research are commercially confidential.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets for the Millennium Experience had been sold in *(a)* Wales, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Northern Ireland by 1 November. [101431]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* NMEC is keen to encourage visitors, from all parts of the UK, to the Dome in 2000. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations and, at over one million, are outstripping advance sales for other worldwide visitor attractions. The company is concerned not to affect the on-going success of ticket sales through publication of selected and piecemeal statistics at this stage. It is competing in the crowded and highly commercial marketplace of visitor attractions and its competitors do not publish detailed statistics of forward sales in the formats that have been requested. However, NMEC has informed the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, on a commercially confidential basis, of progress on ticket sales and will provide, periodically, further progress reports as requested by the Committee. The company will release details in February 2000 of attendance at the Dome during January 2000, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets for the Millennium Experience had been sold in *(a)* North East England, *(b)* North West England and *(c)* the East Midlands by 1 November. [101463]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* NMEC is keen to encourage visitors, from all parts of the UK, to the Dome in 2000. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations and, at over 1 million, are outstripping advance sales for other worldwide visitor attractions. The company is concerned not to affect the on-going success of ticket sales through publication of selected and piecemeal statistics at this stage. It is competing in the crowded and highly commercial marketplace of visitor attractions and its competitors do not publish detailed statistics of forward sales in the formats that have been requested. However, NMEC has informed the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, on a commercially confidential basis, of progress on ticket sales and will provide, periodically, further progress reports as requested by the Committee. The company will release details in February 2000 of attendance at the Dome during January 2000, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets for the Millennium Experience had been sold in *(a)* East Anglia, *(b)* the West Midlands, *(c)* the South West, *(d)* the South East and *(e)* London by 1 November. [101471]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* NMEC is keen to encourage visitors, from all parts of the UK, to the Dome in 2000. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations and, at over 1 million, are outstripping advance sales for other worldwide visitor attractions. The company is concerned not to affect the on-going success of ticket sales through publication of selected and piecemeal statistics at this stage. It is competing in the crowded and highly commercial marketplace of visitor attractions and its competitors do not publish detailed statistics of forward sales in the formats that have been requested. However, NMEC has informed the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, on a commercially confidential basis, of progress on ticket sales and will provide, periodically, further progress reports as requested by the Committee. The company will release details in February 2000 of attendance at the Dome during January 2000, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many free tickets to the Millennium Dome have been made available to Dome sponsors. [99129]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 23 November 1999]:* It is normal and established practice that sponsors of major events receive tickets to the sponsored event. The value of tickets is taken into account in calculating the sponsorship package. The New Millennium Experience Company's sponsorship arrangements mirror this approach and, consequently, sponsors of the Millennium Experience project receive a number of tickets in proportion to, and as a reflection of, the scale of their sponsorship.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many applications there have been by region from schools for tickets to visit the Millennium Dome from January to May 2000 inclusive; and how many were granted for the same period by region. [100297]

Janet Anderson: So far over 560,000 children are booked to visit the Dome. The high level of enthusiasm among schoolchildren and teachers has, in part, been fired by the Learning Experience programme. This is a series of initiatives run by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) to assist delivery of its "education" objective. Over the last 12 months in particular, NMEC has issued four Millennium Experience resource packs to all schools; finalised arrangements for the McDonald's Our Town Stage event which enables every education authority and library board to have a day in the Dome; worked with Tesco on the SchoolNet2000 initiative through which children are compiling an electronic Domesday Book which will be completed this month; and worked with Marks and Spencer on Voices of Promise, which has encouraged and enabled children to compose songs for the millennium.

The first of the ballots to allocate the one million free school tickets to the Dome was drawn on 15 November and covered the period February through to April 2000 inclusive. These free tickets are outside NMEC's 12 million visitor target and were not included in the recent announcement by the Shareholder, Lord Falconer, that over a million tickets had already been sold. A total of 226,408 free tickets have been allocated in this first ballot to over 2,600 schools. All schools who applied by the closing date received an allocation. The number of successful schools by region are:

Region	*Number*
South East	501
London	614
East	288
South West	284
East Midlands	246
West Midlands	186
Yorkshire and Humberside	135
North West	133
Wales	104
North East	42
Scotland	33
Northern Ireland	28

The closing date for the second ballot for free tickets, covering the period May to July, is 13 February; the closing date for the third ballot, covering the period September to November, is 11 June; and the closing date for the fourth ballot, covering December, is 10 September. Over 2,500 schools have chosen to apply for paid-for visits at £8 per child. So far, the total number of reservations from these schools is 340,000. NMEC, through the Education and Learning Experience Managers in its 12 offices countrywide (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside, the North West, the East Midlands, the West Midlands, the East, the South East, the South West and London), and through the regional media will continue to ensure that all schools are fully aware of the free ticket scheme and of the education visit arrangements.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the budgeted income was from ticket sales to the Millennium Dome for the first eight weeks for which tickets were on sale; and what the actual income from such sales was. [99333]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1999]:* NMEC is keen to encourage visitors, from all parts of the UK, to the Dome in 2000. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations and, at over one million, are outstripping advance sales for other worldwide visitor attractions. The company is concerned not to affect the on-going success of ticket sales through publication of selected and piecemeal statistics at this stage. It is competing in the crowded and highly commercial marketplace of visitor attractions and its competitors do not publish detailed statistics of forward sales in the formats that have been requested. However, NMEC has informed the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, on a commercially confidential basis, of progress on ticket sales and will provide, periodically, further progress reports as requested by the Committee. The company will release details in February 2000 of attendance at the Dome during January 2000, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets have been sold to date for entry to the Millennium Dome, broken down on a geographical basis. [100786]

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people from North Yorkshire have bought tickets to visit the Millennium Dome in January 2000. [103838]

Janet Anderson: NMEC is keen to encourage visitors, from all parts of the UK, to the Dome in 2000. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations and, at over 1 million, are outstripping advance sales for other world-wide visitor attractions. The company is concerned not to affect the on-going success of ticket sales through publication of selected and piecemeal statistics at this stage. It is competing in the crowded and highly commercial market place of visitor attractions and its competitors do not publish detailed statistics of forward sales in the formats that have been requested. However, NMEC has informed the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, on a commercially confidential basis, of progress on ticket sales and will provide, periodically, further progress reports as requested by the Committee. The company will

release details in February 2000 of attendance at the Dome during January 2000, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the allocation of room in the Millennium Dome for primary school children to eat packed lunches. [103204]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* Children will be able to eat their packed lunches within the Dome. There are spaces available for visitors generally to use for such purposes.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make provision to give primary school teachers free passes to the Millennium Dome to enable them to make preliminary visits before taking children in school parties. [103206]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* All education groups that have confirmed a visit to the Dome will receive, in advance of their visit, a Welcome Pack. This pack will provide all the information a teacher will need to plan their visit. As well as containing the group's tickets, the Welcome Pack will include an orientation leaflet designed to show the visitor the location of all the zones in the Dome as well as all the other major amenities on site. A video will also be included in the pack. This 10-minute video includes a computer generated fly-through of the Dome, covering each of the 14 zones, the Millennium Show and the Skyscape arena. Further, a brochure will also be included which contains a summary of the content and key messages contained within each zone. It is not possible for NMEC to offer reconnaissance visits to the site but their aim, with the material provided, is to ensure that teachers have sufficient information to plan their day at the Dome. Teachers should also be able to complete any risk assessment analysis that is required before visits can take place.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many free school tickets have been granted to primary schools in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales for visits to the Millennium Dome. [103207]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The one million free tickets available to schools are being allocated through four ballots—one in November 1999, one in February, one in June and one in September 2000. All schools have been given details of the scheme. The New Millennium Experience Company announced the outcome of the first ballot on 30 November when 226,498 free tickets were awarded to 2,600 schools. All those who applied by the cut-off date for the November ballot received an allocation of tickets. The company included, in its announcement, a regional breakdown. I have placed copies in the House Libraries. About 70 per cent. of the tickets applied for have been for children of primary school age.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on guide facilities for primary school parties visiting the Millennium Dome. [103205]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* There are some 800 Hosts on site at any one time available to help visitors, including school groups, enjoy their day at the Dome to the full. It is not the New Millennium Experience Company's policy to allocate formal guides to particular groups of visitors; the Hosts' training programmes aim to ensure that they can deal with the requirements of all visitors. In addition, the individual exhibit zones have dedicated staff who are able to "guide" school and other groups through the zone.

Lottery Terminals

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many Dome tickets have been sold through Lottery terminals. [101513]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* NMEC is keen to encourage visitors, from all parts of the UK, to the Dome in 2000. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations and, at over one million, are outstripping advance sales for other worldwide visitor attractions. The company is concerned not to affect the on-going success of ticket sales through publication of selected and piecemeal statistics at this stage. It is competing in the crowded and highly commercial marketplace of visitor attractions and its competitors do not publish detailed statistics of forward sales in the formats that have been requested. However, NMEC has informed the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, on a commercially confidential basis, of progress on ticket sales and will provide, periodically, further progress reports as requested by the Committee. The company will release details in February 2000 of attendance at the Dome during January 2000, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Cinemas (Preservation Order)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the cinemas in England and Wales that have a preservation order on them. [103169]

Janet Anderson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has the power to list buildings in England; the responsibility for listing buildings in Wales rests with the Welsh National Assembly. Local planning authorities can serve Building Preservation Notices (BPNs) in respect of buildings which are not listed, but which they consider are of special architectural or historic interest and are under threat. BPNs remain in force for six months during which the Secretary of State must decide whether to list the building concerned. There are no such cases currently before him.

There are 123 listed cinema buildings in England; English Heritage recently launched a public consultation in respect of a further 30 cinema buildings which it has identified as having the potential for listing. The consultation period lasts until 1 March next year, after which English Heritage will submit its recommendations to the Secretary of State for decision.

London Art Market

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact of prospective taxes on the London art market. [103837]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 217–18W .

Football

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the expenditure on football ground improvements involving grant and loan aid from the Football Trust in each year from 1988, broken down by ground. [103756]

Kate Hoey: £250 million of grant aid has been awarded to clubs for ground development projects since the Government began to contribute to funding of the Football Trust in 1990 through a reduction in pool duty. The decisions by the Trust on payments have been placed in both Libraries of the House since that date. Information on Trust grant payments from 1988–90 is available from the Trust itself.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the amount of Government grants to the Football Trust in each year from 1988. [103757]

Kate Hoey: The Government have provided funding to the Football Trust through a reduction in pool betting duty since 1990. The Trust has received the following amounts:

	£ million
1990–91	18.7
1991–92	20.4
1992–93	21.1
1993–94	22.6
1994–95	22.8
1995–96	15.9
1996–97	13.6
1997–98	10.1
1998–99	7.8

Source:
The Football Trust

Overseas Visitors

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received on the number of overseas visitors to the UK in each of the last three years. [102016]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* I am not aware of specific representations. The numbers were 25.2 million in 1996, 25.5 million in 1997 and 25.7 million in 1998.

Lottery Funding

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the successful bids from churches and other religious institutions for grants to assist capital works under the various lottery applications since May 1997. [103097]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* According to the latest information from the lottery distributors, to date 488 awards totalling £79,737,219 have gone to capital projects which are directly attributable to churches and other religious institutions. I have placed a full list in the Libraries of the House.

Sports Funding

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the Government grant support given to Sport England and its predecessor body for each of the years from 1994 to 1999. [103874]

Kate Hoey: Sport England was established by Royal Charter on 19 September 1996 and became fully operational on 1 January 1997. Since then its grant in aid has been:

Year	*£ million*
1996–97	[1]15.7
1997–98	33.7
1998–99	33.5
1999–2000	[2]34.5

[1] From 1 January 1997
[2] Allocation

Prior to the establishment of Sport England funding for sport was channelled through the GB Sports Council. Grant in aid to the GB Sports Council for the relevant years was:

Year	*£ million*
1993–94	50.6
1994–95	49.4
1995–96	49.2
1996–97[1]	27.7

[1] Up to 31 December 1996

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the obstacles that have prevented his Department from answering any of the questions tabled by the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central since 8 November about ticket sales for the Millennium Experience. [103601]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* I have answered the questions tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) about ticket sales for the Millennium Experience in as open a way as possible and I remain grateful for his interest in the project.

NMEC is keen to encourage visitors, from all parts of the UK, to the Dome in 2000. Ticket sales and reservations are running ahead of NMEC's expectations and, at over 1 million, are outstripping advance sales for other worldwide visitor attractions. The company is concerned not to affect the on-going success of ticket sales through publication of selected and piecemeal statistics at this stage. It is competing in the crowded and highly commercial marketplace of visitor attractions and its competitors do not publish detailed statistics of forward sales in the formats that have been requested. However, NMEC has informed the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, on a commercially confidential basis, of progress on ticket sales and will provide, periodically, further progress reports as requested by the Committee. The company will release details in February 2000 of attendance at the Dome during January 2000, and on a monthly basis thereafter.

Free Television Licences (Over-75s)

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received about refunds for television licence stamps already purchased by people aged over 75 years. [103637]

Kate Hoey: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has received 12 letters from Members of the House of Commons and seven from members of the public about refunds of television licence savings stamps purchased by people aged 75 or over. Any television licence savings stamps not required to purchase a licence can be redeemed, by post, from TV Licensing. We intend to announce full details of the scheme, including the precise starting date, early in the new year.

World Cup Envoy

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the overseas visits made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) in his capacity as the Prime Minister's Envoy to the 2006 World Cup campaign; and if he will list those members of the FIFA Executive the hon. Member for West Ham has met since taking on his new role. [103124]

Kate Hoey: The information requested by my hon. Friend has been supplied by the FA 2006 bid team and is as follows:

Country visited	*FIFA executive member(s) met*
Zurich	Joseph S. Blatter (FIFA President)
Kuala Lumpur	Mohamed Bin Hammam (Qatar) Worawi Makudi (Thailand) Dr. Chung Mong-Joon (Korea)
Saudi Arabia and Qatar	Mohamed Bin Hammam (Qatar)
Thailand	Worawi Makudi (Thailand)
New Zealand	Charles Dempsey (New Zealand) Lennart Johansson (Sweden) Julio Grondona (Argentina) David Will (Scotland) Issa Hayatou (Cameroon) Dr. Joseph Mifsud (Malta) Senes Erzik (Turkey) Jack Warner (Trinidad and Tobago) Angel Maria Villar Llona (Spain)
U.S.A.	Chuck Blazer (U.S.A.)

Shipwreck Amsterdam

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the management of the archaeological site of the shipwreck Amsterdam. [103036]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The wreck site of the Amsterdam was one of the first sites to be afforded legal protection under the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973. Designation of a wreck site under the provisions of this Act makes it an offence for anyone to tamper with, damage or remove any part of a vessel without the authority of a licence granted by the Secretary of State. Recently concerns have been voiced over the state of steel girders left over the site following licensed archaeological excavations in the 1980s. I am pleased to be able to report that these girders were removed in October this year.

Underwater Heritage

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will assess the benefits of transferring responsibility for underwater cultural heritage to English Heritage. [103037]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Government are fully committed to transferring responsibility for underwater cultural heritage to English Heritage as soon as a suitable legislative opportunity arises. This will put underwater archaeology on the same footing as land archaeology, allowing access to English Heritage grant funds which are currently not available to underwater projects.

Stonehenge

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the bids received by English Heritage in respect of the Stonehenge Visitors Centre project have been evaluated and by whom; what is the timescale for consequent decisions; whether the bids have been seen and considered by *(a)* the National Trust, *(b)* the Ministry of Defence, *(c)* the DETR and *(d)* Salisbury District Council; and when their comments will be (i) considered by him and (ii) published. [103408]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The preferred commercial operator of the new visitor centre will be chosen by a selection panel which is made up of commissioners and senior staff of English Heritage, council members and senior staff of the National Trust and a senior member of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The panel have been provided with a wide range of professional and technical advice and the Highways Agency, English Nature, Salisbury District Council and Wiltshire County Council have all been consulted. The Ministry of Defence is not involved in the selection of the operator for the new visitor centre. The panel met with representatives of the short listed bidders on 16 December and hopes to make an announcement of the preferred bidder early in 2000. Salisbury District Council will, in due course, consider a planning application submitted by the preferred bidder. It is not possible at this stage to give an accurate estimate of the timescale for the consultations that will follow the selection of the bidder.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

High Court Judges

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the Lord Chancellor's disciplinary powers regarding the conduct of High Court judges. [103742]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor has no power to remove High Court judges. They can be dismissed only by the Queen following a resolution of both Houses of Parliament. But the Lord Chancellor, as head of the judiciary, is able to guide, counsel, advise or rebuke with a view to ensuring that judges uphold the standards of conduct which the public expect of them.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many High Court judges have been censured by the Lord Chancellor since May 1997. [103811]

Jane Kennedy: Since May 1997, the Lord Chancellor has seen fit to "censure" two High Court judges. In the first instance, he wrote to a judge who had used official paper for private purposes. In the second, he spoke to a judge who had re-assigned a case from one judge to another without a hearing in open court.

IT Systems (Land Registry)

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what factors underlay the retention of business process re-engineering within the Land Registry when the recent decision over contracting out IT systems was taken. [103626]

Jane Kennedy: The recently awarded contract represents a key strategic partnership between HM Land Registry and COMPAQ, which seeks to make best use of private sector expertise in providing, maintaining and enhancing the Land Registry's IT infrastructure. This partnership will see the agency continuing to progress the work carried out so far in re-engineering its business processes, working alongside COMPAQ, which will ensure the IT infrastructure is capable of meeting the Land Registry's current and future needs.

This partnership arrangement is the best option for ensuring that effective change is taken forward as quickly as possible with minimal risk.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103852]

Mr. Lock: Delivering efficient and modern public services is a key part of the Government's agenda for improving productivity. Greater efficiency is being sought therefore within the public sector to ensure that the most effective results are obtained from available resources. The Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA) includes a range of measures for taking this forward, both within the Department and in other public sector bodies.

Those measures which will help raise the Department's own productivity are as follows:

General productivity measures include:

Better Quality Services—to review 60 per cent. of LCD services by March 2003.

Sickness absence—to contribute towards a reduction in public sector sickness absence of 20 per cent. by 2001 and 30 per cent. by 2003.

Procurement—to achieve an annual 5 per cent. reduction in general procurement expenditure.

Specific LCD departmental targets include:

To reduce the duration of civil cases by: increasing the proportion of administrative processes dealt with in target time from 92 per cent. to 95 per cent.; reducing the waiting times for asylum appeals at the Immigration Appellate Authorities from 36 to 17 weeks by 2000–01.

To reduce the unit cost of civil cases in real terms by: reducing court room over-capacity; reducing unit costs of items of originating process in the civil courts by an average of 3 per cent. per annum; reducing the unit cost of asylum appeals by 3 per cent. per annum.

To halve the time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders from 142 to 61 days.

To reduce the average number of days taken for cases in magistrates courts from 31 to 29 days by March 2000.

To achieve stability in real terms in the cost of legally aided criminal defence services by March 2002.

To reduce in real terms the units cost of cases in the Crown court by an average of 3 per cent. per annum.

Many of the targets listed are also Key Performance Indicators or supporting targets of the LCD's Court Service Agency.

The Department's gross running costs provision for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 is set out in its PSA. The productivity measures listed will enable the Department to increase the quantity and quality of outputs delivered by its running cost expenditure over this period.

Persistent Young Offenders

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average time taken from arrest to sentence of persistent young offenders in Nottinghamshire in the latest month for which figures are available; and what was the equivalent figure for the same month one year earlier. [103184]

Jane Kennedy: The Government's pledge to halve the average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders is monitored using data from the Police National Computer. The most recent figures by police force area refer to January 1999 to June 1999 when the average for Nottinghamshire was 126 days. Monthly figures for Nottinghamshire over this period are not available. Figures for January to June 1998 covering Nottinghamshire alone are not available: the previous figures cover 1998 as a whole, and the average for Nottinghamshire was 148 days. Further information about these figures is available in LCD Press Notices 154–99 and 368–99 copies of which have been placed in the House of Commons Library.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Growth Promoters

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which antibiotics are permitted for use in farming as growth promoters in *(a)* Thailand and *(b)* Brazil in products that may be imported into the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [100402]

Ms Quin: The details as to which antibiotic growth promoters are used in Thailand and Brazil in the farming of food animals that are likely to be imported into the UK are not currently available. However, it is possible that some antibiotic growth promoters are used in the rearing of food-producing animals that are not permitted for such use in the EU. In adopting a temporary ban on four antibiotic growth promoters in December 1998, the Council of Agriculture Ministers asked the Commission to produce a report on the external dimension of the measure. In particular, the Council asked the Commission to consider how the EU's trading partners might be encouraged to adopt equivalent measures. This report is expected by the end of this year.

Poultry (Thailand)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the occasions since 1 May 1997 when *(a)* poultry farms and *(b)* poultry processing plants in Thailand have been inspected by (i) MAFF officials alone, (ii) MAFF officials within an EU inspection team and (iii) an EU inspection team not including MAFF officials; and if he will place in the Library copies of the reports of those visits. [101100]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* Veterinary staff from the MAFF/Department of Health Joint Food Safety and Standards Group and the MAFF Veterinary International Trade team visited Thailand from 31 January to 12 February this year. They visited five poultry meat establishments, four of which were combined slaughterhouses, cutting plants, meat preparations and meat products premises. The fifth establishment was a stand-alone meat products premises. The central laboratory of the Department of Livestock Development, a hatchery and a broiler farm were visited. The report of the mission was sent to the Commission and placed in the Library on 24 June 1999. It can also be found on the Ministry's internet site, the address of which is http://maffweb/animalh/int-trde. A European Commission-led inspection of poultry or poultry meat premises in Thailand is currently under way, and I will ensure that the report is placed in the Libraries of the House as soon as it is available.

Farm Animal Welfare

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will introduce legislation to require pigmeat and other meat which has been produced by methods which would be illegal in the UK to be labelled as such; and if he will make a statement. [101637]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Unilateral action of the kind suggested would be contrary to European law. However, MAFF is raising such labelling issues in EU and international discussions. We are also consulting all interested parties on guidance aimed at ensuring that country of origin markings on food labels provide accurate information about the true origin of ingredients used. In the meantime, we will continue to encourage retailers, caterers and public procurement authorities to source their supplies of pork and pork products to British standards.

Beef on the Bone Ban

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons the Government *(a)* decided to require that no beef with the bone in from cattle over six months old should be sold to consumers and *(b)* not to make public the research findings on the subject, together with SEAC's assessment of the risk. [101735]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* The ban on sales of bone-in beef from cattle over six months of age was introduced after the Government was advised by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) that BSE infectivity had been discovered in the dorsal root ganglia, and possibly bone marrow, of cattle infected experimentally with BSE. The Government's decision to introduce the controls was taken after consideration of SEAC's advice and in the light of advice from the then CMO, Sir Kenneth Calman, that he would be very concerned if any tissues that had been shown to transmit BSE were knowingly allowed to remain in the human food chain.

SEAC's advice to Ministers, including its assessment of the risk, was published on 3 December 1997 by means of a Ministry of Agriculture News Release. Sir Kenneth Calman's advice was published on 5 December 1997 by means of a Department of Health News Release. Copies of both were placed in the Library of the House. Details of the research findings were published in a peer review journal "The Veterinary Record": GAH Wells et al, January 1998 (vol.142, pp.103–106), and March 1999 (vol.144, pp.292–294).

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what new scientific evidence he received between 21 September and the date on which he announced the lifting of the ban on beef on the bone. [101737]

Mr. Nick Brown: On 30 November, I received joint advice from the 4 CMOs in the UK, based on the latest epidemiological estimates from the Oxford Group.

A copy of this advice was placed in the Library of the House at the time.

Pig Farming

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the cost to pig farmers in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Cumbria of the banning of sow stalls and tethers. [102396]

Ms Quin: The stall and tether ban was introduced in 1991, with an eight-year phase-out period for existing stall and tether systems. No recent assessments have therefore been made of the costs to pig farmers in either the UK in general or Cumbria in particular.

Bovine Somatropin

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will support the European Commission's proposal to ban bovine somatropin from January 2000. [101748]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* We have received clear advice from the Veterinary Products Committee (VPC) that the treatment of dairy cows with recombinant bovine somatropin (rBST) is associated with severe welfare problems. We announced on 11 October that we had accepted the VPC's advice to support a continuation of the moratorium or equivalent measures which prohibit the use of rBST. Accordingly, we support the ban proposed by the European Commission. A copy of the VPC's report is in the Library of the House.

Over-30-months Scheme

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what were the findings of the SEAC review into the over-thirty-months scheme; and if he will make a statement. [102218]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) is not undertaking a review of the over-thirty-months scheme, but of the over-thirty-month rule,

which determines those bovines which may be slaughtered for human consumption. The Committee has been considering the issues involved at its meetings throughout 1999. Reports of its deliberations have been the subject of subsequent press briefings by the SEAC Chairman and published in SEAC News Releases. SEAC continued the review at its most recent meeting on 29 November. The normal press briefing will be held, and News Release issued, shortly.

Hunting

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice his Ministry gives to *(a)* hunts and *(b)* hunt kennels on the implication for hunts of measures to deal with specified risk material. [102540]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Hunts and hunt kennels are consulted on proposals to amend the statutory controls on specified risk material (SRM) through the Master of Foxhounds Association and the Master of Deerhounds Association. The operators of hunt kennels are advised as necessary on the SRM controls by Ministry veterinary officers during their monthly audit visits to these premises. Such advice will normally be confirmed in writing, particularly in respect of any deficiencies in the handling or control of SRM found. Advice is also given in response to specific requests by letter or telephone from individual hunts or hunt kennels.

BSE Inquiry

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much the Phillips Inquiry into BSE has cost to date; and what estimate he has made of its final cost. [102790]

Ms Quin: The cost to date of the BSE Inquiry, including the costs of liaison units and legal support for witnesses from the main Departments involved, is about £20 million. The present estimate of the final cost is about £26 million.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Phillips Inquiry into BSE will report. [102789]

Ms Quin: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on 8 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 459W.

CAP Support Regimes

Mr. Curry: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the CAP support regimes which will be subject to the modulation levy under the rural development regulation, together with the cash yield of a 1 per cent. levy for each regime, in respect of *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland. [102465]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The Government announced their intention on 7 December to introduce modulation of farm payments as from 2001 and to use the funds released, with Government match funding, towards the seven-year Rural Development programme. A list of the farm payments affected is given in the table.

Levels of modulation receipts will vary each year. Indicative receipts from 1 per cent. modulation for the years 2001 to 2006 in England would be:

	£ million
2001	14
2002	15
2003	15
2004	15
2005	15
2006	16

These receipts would refer to the calendar year in which the modulation was applied. Due to operational considerations, some receipts from modulation in one calendar year would not be available for spending until the following financial year.

The National Assembly for Wales has recently announced its intention to apply modulation. The Scottish Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly will be making announcements on funding the Rural Development Regulation shortly.

List of CAP scheme payments

Sector	*Legal base*	*Notes*
Arable crops	Articles 2 and 5, Regulation (EC) No 1251/1999	Area payments including set-aside payments and including durum wheat and special aid
Potato starch	Article 8(2), Regulation (EEC) No 1766/92	Payment
Grain legumes	Article 1, Regulation (EC) No 1577/96	Area aid
Flax	Article 4, Regulation (EEC) No 1308/70	Area aid (the portion paid to farmers)
Hemp	Article 4, Regulation (EEC) No 1308/70	Area aid
Silkworms	Article 2, Regulation (EEC) No 845/72	Aid to encourage rearing
Tobacco	Article 3, Regulation (EEC) No 2075/92	Production aid
Seeds	Article 3, Regulation (EEC) No 2358/71	Production aid
Hops	Article 12, Regulation (EEC) No 1696/71 Regulation (EC) No 1098/98	Area aid Payments for temporary resting only

List of CAP scheme payments

Sector	*Legal base*	*Notes*
Beef and veal	Articles 4, 5, 6 and 10, 11, 13, Regulation (EC) No 1254/1999	Special premium, deseasonalisation premium, suckler cow premium (including when paid for heifers and including the additional national suckler cow premium when co-financed), slaughter premium extensification payment, additional payments
Milk and dairy products	Articles 16 and 17, Regulation (EC) No 1256/1999	Dairy premium and additional payments
Sheep and goats	Article 5, Regulation (EC) No 2467/98	Ewe and she-goat premium and LFA supplements
Agri-money	Articles 4 and 5 of Regulation (EC) No 2799/98: Articles 2 and 3 of Regulation (EC) No 2800/98	Payments to producers (including those under the transitional Regulation)

Regional Offices

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if it is the Government's policy to reintegrate the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency into his Department; [103064]

(2) if it is the Government's policy to reorganise his Department's regional offices to match the existing Government standard regions; and if his Department's regional offices are to be absorbed into the Government Offices for the Regions. [103063]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Department already works to Government Offices regional boundaries where appropriate, for example in drawing up the regional chapters of the England Rural Development Plan under the EU Rural Development Regulation and in administering the EU Structural Funds.

As part of the Department's contribution to the Modernising Government initiative, we are currently reviewing the way MAFF's Regional Service Centres (RSCs) and the Intervention Board administer payments under the Common Agricultural Policy in England. In parallel with this review, and in the context of the Government's regional agenda, we are considering how best to achieve even closer integration of our regional policy activities with those of the Government Offices for the Regions.

The Farming and Rural Conservation Agency's major task is to assist in delivering important parts of the Rural Development Regulation. One significant option which is being considered would be for most of the staff currently in the FRCA to form part of a future MAFF presence in the Government Offices for the Regions.

The outcome of the review of MAFF's activities in the regions, including the future for FRCA, will be carefully considered.

Pig Industry

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to introduce aid for the pig industry to cover the costs of offal disposal. [103242]

Ms Quin: Officials have explored the possibility of a pig offal disposal scheme with the European Commission. In principle, Community rules might permit the payment of a state aid in this area, but there appears to be no scope to frame a sensible and worthwhile scheme which satisfies the strict EU guidelines and meets the requirements of industry. The Commission will certainly not sanction any scheme which fails to meet the rules; and we could not contemplate paying an illegal aid. The rules preclude the payment of operating aids, i.e. subsidies that are simply aimed at improving the producer's position in the market.

Working Groups

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the report of the Intervention System Working Group. [104005]

Mr. Nick Brown: I have received the report of the Intervention System Red Tape Working Group and am immediately placing copies in the Library of the House.

I am very grateful to the working Group for their hard work in completing their report so quickly. As with the other two red tape groups, I asked them to think radically and to suggest ways of doing things better. The Group points out that when there is a need for intervention, the system must work more effectively and enable UK producers to compete on a level playing field. Useful changes can be made, and many of the Group's recommendations concentrate on practical ideas for improvement which could be implemented quickly. I shall be considering the report very carefully with my colleagues and we will give our considered response in the New Year.

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the report of the IACS and Inspections Working Group. [104006]

Mr. Nick Brown: I have received the report of the IACS (Integrated Administration and Control System) and Inspections Red Tape Working Group and am immediately placing copies in the Library of the House.

I am very grateful to the Working Group for their hard work in completing their report so quickly. As with the other two red tape groups, I asked them to think radically and to suggest ways of doing things better. They have done this with recommendations which call for action both in Brussels and at home. They include challenging objectives for both Government and the industry in making maximum use of Information Technology. E-commerce offers farmers real opportunities to increase the effectiveness of their business operations. Our on-going programme for redeveloping our CAP processing IT systems is designed to offer real benefits to farmers in the way they interact with

us. The report makes a number of other recommendations, including further reducing the number of forms and of inspection visits and establishing an independent appeals mechanism. I shall be considering the report very carefully with my colleagues and we will give our considered response in the New Year.

CABINET OFFICE

Independent Tribunals

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what procedures exist for resolving complaints by independent tribunals against Government Departments. [100301]

Mr. Stringer: Independent tribunals are excluded from making complaints to the Parliamentary Ombudsman about Government Departments under section 6(1) of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many research contracts have been let by her Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100161]

Mr. Stringer: This information is not held centrally and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Rural Affairs

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent discussions she has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Deputy Prime Minister on rural affairs; and if she will make a statement. [102133]

Marjorie Mowlam: As was the practice of the previous Administration, details of internal meetings between Ministers are confidential.

IT Initiatives

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the effectiveness of the initiatives based on the use of IT to improve public services set up by her Department since 1997. [101914]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have adopted a challenging programme to modernise public services using new technology. This ranges from accessing Government services from one's digital television set, accessing the Internet through a PC in the local library or phoning a call centre, such as NHS Direct, for health advice.

We also want to improve the introduction of new technology. As part of our major review of the handling of Government IT projects, we are looking to identify the pillars that support successful IT projects and to make sure that they are put in place in the future. These include:

Full assessment of the risks involved in a project and clear plans for managing them.

Strong contingency plans.

Keeping the scale of a project to something manageable.

Making sure that both the supplier and the purchaser clearly understand the aims of the project, and their respective responsibilities.

We need to ensure that we learn lessons from past projects so that future systems run effectively and deliver value for money.

Target Setting

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 161W, on target setting, if she will list the Government's policy co-ordinators appointed since May 1997, giving in each case the number of targets they have set to date, excluding any targets listed in her previous answer. [102068]

Mr. Stringer: This information is not held centrally and can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office for each of the buildings under her Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102331]

Marjorie Mowlam: For the 13 buildings under control of the Cabinet Office, the number of rooms set aside for the uses specified is as follows:

(a) None

(b) None

(c) 16.

2 Marsham Street

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how long the former Department of the Environment buildings in Marsham Street have been empty; what is their square footage; and what is the commercial rent lost as a result of them being empty. [102866]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. John Locke, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John C. Locke to Mr. Edward Leigh, dated 16 December 1999:

The Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, Ian McCartney, has asked me as Chief Executive of Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE), to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question about 2 Marsham Street.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions finally vacated 2 Marsham Street at the end of April 1998. The existing building has a net internal area of 603,708 square feet or 56,084.5 square metres.

2 Marsham Street, in its present condition, would not attract a commercial letting, as the existing buildings would require a substantial refurbishment before they could be re-occupied. At the

time Home Office were considering decant use, the cost of refurbishment was estimated to be in the region of £30 million. In the Agency's view refurbishment to attract a commercial rent is not a viable option.

Until Home Office have reached a decision on the re-use of the site, in connection with their Headquarters PFI project, they have agreed to pay the holding costs of the property, including a rent which represents a return on the value of the site.

Pending the commencement of demolition, part of the lower floors of the building are once again being used as an emergency winter shelter for the homeless.

IT Projects

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she has taken to ensure that the findings of the review by her Department of major Government IT projects will be taken into account in negotiations to which they may be relevant. [103627]

Mr. Ian McCartney: One of the main strands of the work currently under-way is to examine pending and on-going IT projects to ensure that lessons are learned from our past problems and our successes. The review team is working closely with Departments to ensure that this happens.

Particular attention is being paid to areas of weakness in past projects, to make sure that the pillars that support successful IT projects are in place before new contracts are signed. The team's early work has shown that these include:

Making full assessment of the risks involved in a project, and having clear plans for managing them.

Having strong contingency plans.

Keeping the scale of the project manageable.

Making sure that both the supplier and the purchaser clearly understand the aims of the project, and their respective responsibilities.

Drugs

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if her Department has set targets for reducing access to drugs by *(a)* young people and *(b)* school children. [103383]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government's anti-drugs Strategy "Tackling Drugs To Build A Better Britain" has set, as one of its four Key Performance Targets, the target

"to reduce access to all drugs amongst young people (under 25) significantly, and to reduce access to the drugs which cause the greatest harm, particularly heroin and cocaine, by 50 per cent. by 2008 and 25 per cent. by 2005".

School children are, of course, included in this target, although no target relating specifically to school-age children has been set.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what actions she is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of her Department. [103844]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Delivering efficient and modern public services is a key part of the Government's agenda for improving productivity. Greater efficiency is being sought therefore within the public sector to ensure that the most effective results are obtained from available resources. The Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA) is published within "The Public Service Agreements 1999–2002" [CM 4181] and includes a range of measures for taking this forward, both within the Department itself and in other public sector bodies.

Those measures will help raise the Department's own productivity as follows:

Creation of the Better Quality Services Review programme. The programme allows the Department to achieve its PSA target of reviewing 60 per cent. of its activities by March 2003.

Managing and maintaining low sickness absence within the Department. A target reduction of 5 per cent. overall between 1998–2003 is planned.

The Department's active involvement in promoting action on procurement across the service. It has prepared an action plan following the report on "Efficiency in Civil Government Procurement" and is working closely with the Treasury to ensure delivery across the service and with its own domestic procurement agencies to ensure their contribution. The Department is on track to meet its PSA target for increasing the proportion of electronic procurement transactions within 1999–2000.

The Department's gross running costs provision for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 is set out in its PSA. The productivity measures listed above will enable the Department to increase the quantity and quality of outputs delivered by its running costs expenditure over this period.

TREASURY

European Monetary Institute

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was repaid to the Bank of England by the European Monetary Institute when it went into liquidation upon the establishment of the European Central Bank. [103300]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* I refer the right hon. gentleman to page 75 of the Bank of England's 1999 Annual Report.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors underlay his decision to award free television licences to people aged 75 years and over; and if he will make a statement. [103602]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The Government recognise that the television licence fee can be a source of concern for many elderly people. Older pensioner households are more likely to be on low incomes, which is why additional resources will be directed at the 75-plus group. Free television licences to people aged 75 years and over, nearly 50 per cent. of whom are in the lowest three income deciles, is a significant measure for poorer pensioners and will benefit over three million pensioner households.

This measure builds on a number of significant improvements we have made in respect of provision for pensioners. Pensioners aged 75 and over now have a Minimum Income Guarantee of at least £77.30 plus housing costs for single pensioners and £119.85 plus housing costs for couples. The Government have committed to uprate the Minimum Income Guarantee by earnings growth during this Parliament. Pensioners also

benefit from £100 winter fuel payments, tax allowances which have been increased above the rate of inflation, free eye tests, greater support for concessionary fares and improved home insulation schemes.

Unemployment Figures

Mr. Burns: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the date in each month on which the unemployment figures will be announced in 2000. [103365]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Simon Burns, dated 21 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question asking for the date in each month on which the unemployment figures will be announced in 2000. The following table shows the first release date on Labour Market Statistics for 2000.

Month	*National first release dates*
January	[1]19 January
February	16 February
March	15 March
April	[2]19 April
May	17 May
June	14 June
July	12 July
August	16 August
September	13 September
October	18 October
November	15 November
December	13 December

[1] Release date delayed by one week to take account of the millennium.
[2] Release date delayed by one week to take account of Easter.

Employee Sickness

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the number of working days lost through sickness per 1,000 employees in *(a)* the public sector and *(b)* the private sector in the last year for which data are available. [103539]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Philip Hammond, dated 21 December 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question about working days lost due to sickness in the public and private sector.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the major source of labour market data on individuals. It can provide information on the number of days employees were unable to work in the week that they were surveyed. However, as this number of days can also include some when the respondent would not normally work, no accurate estimate of the total number of working days lost in a year can be calculated. No other official source can provide the information requested.

The available information is shown in the table. The table is based on the average of the latest four quarters and shows the rate per 1000 employees.

Employees absent for at least one day in the reference week due to sickness or injury, by whether working in the public or private sector[3] (UK, average of autumn 1998 to summer 1999, not seasonally adjusted)

	[1]Rate per 1000 employees
All employees[2]	46.5
Private sector	44.1
Public sector	53.4

[1] Rates are based on totals that exclude people who did not state if they took a day off in the reference week due to sickness
[2] Includes some people who did not state if they worked in the public or private sector.
[3] Sector of employment is based on respondent's self-assessment.
Source:
Labour Force Survey

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to submit an updated annual Convergence Programme as required by the Stability and Growth Pact. [104120]

Mr. Gordon Brown: As required under the Stability and Growth Pact, an updated, annual Convergence Programme is being submitted to the European Commission today. Copies of the Programme are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish figures showing *(a)* the total updated value of private sector investment in the period covered by the Financial Statement and Budget report, March 1999, resulting from PFI projects and *(b)* the public spending commitments from 1999–2000 onwards resulting from PFI projects signed or expected to be signed by the end of the Comprehensive Spending Review period. [104124]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The figures are set out in the tables:

Table A: Estimated capital spending by the private sector

£ million

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Defence	319.0	315.0	520.0	199.0
FCO and Overseas Development	24.0	29.0	4.0	2.0
Agriculture[1]	0.0	0.0	9.0	12.0
Trade and Industry	51.0	54.0	32.0	32.0
Environment, Transport and the Regions[2]	636.0	917.0	775.0	740.0
Education and Employment[1]	11.0	23.0	27.0	9.0
Home Office	73.0	227.0	195.0	44.0
Legal Departments	16.0	64.0	66.0	26.0
Culture, Media and Sport	1.0	0.0	3.0	4.0
Health	310.0	610.0	740.0	690.0
Social Security	87.0	264.0	166.0	20.0

Table A: Estimated capital spending by the private sector

£ million

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Scotland	219.0	404.0	464.0	120.0
Wales	53.0	90.0	87.0	37.0
Northern Ireland	12.0	36.0	99.0	78.0
Chancellors' Departments	98.0	91.0	34.0	104.0
Local Authorities[4]	287.0	603.0	993.0	886.0
Total	2,197.0	3,727.0	4,214.0	3,003.0

[1] Includes Forestry Commission.
[2] Includes the private sector capital investment in CTRL.
[3] Excludes PFI/PPP activity in the further and higher education (FHE) sectors, which are classified to the private sector. For FHE, the total estimated capital value of major PFI/PPP projects which have been signed or expected to sign is £54 million in 1999–2000 and £152 million in 2000–01.
[4] PFI activity in local authority schools is included in the local authorities line.

Table B: Estimated payments under PFI contracts—December 1999

	£ million
1999–2000	1,167
2000–01	1,787
2001–02	2,219
2002–03	2,624
2003–04	2,885
2004–05	2,940
2005–06	2,903
2006–07	2,920
2007–08	2,925
2008–09	2,816
2009–10	2,796
2010–11	2,736
2011–12	2,672
2012–13	2,557
2013–14	2,495
2014–15	2,376
2015–16	2,156
2016–17	2,118
2017–18	2,084
2018–19	2,000
2019–20	1,991
2020–21	2,006
2021–22	1,950
2022–23	1,959
2023–24	1,833
2024–25	1,808
2025–26	1,517
2026–27	1,236

Note:
Table B shows a forecast of the estimated payments for services flowing from new private investment over the next twenty five years. Actual expenditure will depend on the details of the payment mechanism for each contract. Payments may be lower than estimated due to deductions from the service payments caused by either the supplier's failure to make the service available or a failure to meet the required performance standards. In addition variances may occur due to changes in the service requirements agreed during the course of the contracts. Payments may also vary as a result of the early termination of a contract triggering contractual arrangements for compensation on termination.

Tax Credits

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what communications he has had with the OECD this year about the treatment of tax credits in the public accounts. [103658]

Dawn Primarolo: My officials are in regular contact with their counterparts at the OECD, concerning many issues to do with revenue statistics, including the treatment of tax credits.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his latest estimate of the costs to businesses of administering the working families tax credit; and by what mechanisms he proposes to reimburse businesses for these costs. [103660]

Dawn Primarolo: These figures are contained in the Regulatory Impact Assessment, published on 3 December.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what communications he has had this year with Eurostat about the treatment of tax credits in the public accounts. [103659]

Dawn Primarolo: My officials are in regular contact with their counterparts in Eurostat, concerning many issues to do with the national accounts, including the treatment of tax credits.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library a copy of the OECD's guidelines on the treatment of tax credits in the public accounts. [103657]

Dawn Primarolo: The conventions underlying the OECD figures for international comparisons of tax revenues can be found in the 1999 edition of "Revenue Statistics", published by the OECD.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the total amount of money that will be payable annually to eligible claimants for working families tax credit and child care credits in *(a)* Liverpool, Riverside and *(b)* Liverpool. [103931]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates of the amounts that will be paid to those eligible for Working Families' Tax Credit and child care tax credit in Liverpool, Riverside and Liverpool are not yet available.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in Monmouthshire are currently in receipt of the working families tax credit. [102909]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates for the numbers in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit in Monmouthshire are not yet available.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many members of the armed forces at the Colchester Garrison he estimates are entitled to the working families tax credit; and if he will make a statement. [102853]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that the information requested is not available.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the number of people who will be able to benefit from the working families tax credit in the Middlesbrough South and Cleveland, East constituency; and if he will make a statement. [102911]

Dawn Primarolo: Based on known Family Credit figures for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East, and expected eligibility nationally for Working Families Tax Credit, the estimated number of families which may be eligible for Working Families Tax Credit on this basis in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East is about 2,800.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to extend the working families tax credit *(a)* to absent parents supporting children financially and *(b)* to help families cover housing costs. [103188]

Dawn Primarolo: Currently there are no plans to extend the working families tax credit to absent parents who are financially supporting their children. The Government will set out their housing vision in a Housing Green Paper which they expect to publish next year. The Green Paper will also consider ways of improving the housing benefit scheme.

Double Taxation Agreement

Mr. Colman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to what parliamentary scrutiny he proposes the UK's Double Taxation Agreement with the US will be subject. [102908]

Dawn Primarolo: New Double Taxation Conventions are laid before the House as a Schedule to a draft Order in Council. The usual procedure is that the draft Order is considered first by the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments and then by a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.

New Taxes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the new taxes introduced *(a)* between June 1992 and April 1997 and *(b)* from May 1997 to date. [102863]

Dawn Primarolo: This information can be found in the relevant Financial Statement and Budget Reports, which can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Vintage and Veteran Vehicles

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on taxation levels for vehicles over 25 years old; [103153]

(2) what plans he has to seek an amendment to the taxation levels on vintage and veteran cars and motor-cycles. [103154]

Mr. Timms: Any tax changes will be announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the context of his Budget statement. In general, vehicles manufactured before 1 January 1973 are exempt from vehicle excise duty. Full details of this scheme can be found in the DVLA publication "Exemption from vehicle excise duty for historic vehicles".

Environmental Tax Revenue

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reinvest environmental tax revenues. [103187]

Mr. Timms: The Government will consider, on a case by case basis, the use to which the revenues from additional environmental taxes should be put.

The Pre Budget Report announced that, in future, the revenues from any further real terms increases in fuel duties will be spent on improving public transport and modernising the road network.

The revenues from the Climate Change Levy will be used to pay for 0.3 percentage point cut in employers' National Insurance and £150 million of support for energy efficiency measures in 2001–02.

The revenues from the Landfill Tax, introduced by the previous Government, were also used to reduce employers' National Insurance. The Government make 20 per cent. of the yield from the landfill tax available as credits to support environmental projects under the Environmental Bodies Credit Scheme.

Land Settlement Tenants

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will meet the Chairman of the Inland Revenue and hon. Members representing former land settlement tenants to seek to establish a resolution of the tax issues relating to the compensation agreed with the Ministry of Agriculture in 1991. [103186]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 79W.

VAT

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the French Government's decision to reduce VAT on energy-saving materials. [103474]

Mr. Timms: The French reduced rate is for the renovation and repair of private dwellings and has been introduced under the new Annex K of the Sixth VAT Directive. The French have not introduced a reduced rate for DIY energy saving materials, since the reduced rate in Annex K may be applied only to labour intensive services.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce VAT on energy-saving materials. [103473]

Mr. Timms: This Government have already reduced to 5 per cent. the VAT rate applicable to grant-funded installation of energy saving materials in the homes of the less well off. EC VAT law does not allow the UK to apply a reduced VAT rate to sales of energy saving materials for DIY installation.

E-commerce Taxation

Mr. Colman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect taxation in relation to the tax treatment of e-commerce and its impact on any renegotiated double tax agreement. [103632]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's policy on the direct and indirect tax treatment of e-commerce is set out in the paper "Electronic Commerce: the UK's taxation agenda" which it published on 26 November.

The outcome of the ongoing work on the tax implications of e-commerce will be taken into account as appropriate in future double taxation agreements.

Double Taxation

Mr. Colman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what economic evaluation his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned of the overall balance of advantage of existing double tax agreements. [103631]

Dawn Primarolo: It is widely recognised in the United Kingdom and other leading industrialised countries that double taxation agreements encourage international trade and investment by relieving double taxation and providing certainty of tax treatment. Investment and income flows are taken into account in negotiating double taxation agreements. The business community is invited regularly to give its views on the priorities for negotiating new agreements and renegotiating existing agreements. The many representations made by business during our annual review of our network of agreements show the considerable value of these agreements to the United Kingdom, and in particular to UK business.

Mortgages and Pensions Website

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made in establishing a web-site to provide advice on mortgages and pensions to the general public. [103745]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Financial Services Authority published a consultation document on 4 October setting out proposals for a comparative information scheme. This is available on their website. Included in this are individual personal pensions and mortgage endowment policies. In time, other products may be included. The Treasury has no separate plans to provide such information.

EU Budget

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will break down into the constituent items the figures included as the United Kingdom gross contribution to EU institutions in 1998 stated in Table *(a)* 9.2 and *(b)* 9.7 of the 1999 Pink Book. [103385]

Miss Melanie Johnson: A breakdown of Table 9.2 into its Balance of Payments current account is given in Tables 9.4 to 9.7 of the Pink Book. A detailed breakdown of Table 9.7 into its constituent items is given in Table 5.1 of the Pink Book. However, as I advised the hon. Member in my reply of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 77–78W, details of UK gross contributions to EU Institutions, including a breakdown by type of transaction, are presented in Tables 3.11, 5.1 and 6.1 of the Pink Book. A summary of all UK official Government transactions with EU Institutions is also given in Table 11.2 of the Blue Book.

Public Investment Programmes (PSBR)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the value is of the projected investment over the next five years by all those public enterprises and publicly owned companies whose investment programmes are not subject to PSBR restraint; [103907]

(2) if he will list the public enterprises and publicly-owned companies whose investment programmes are not subject to PSBR restraint. [103909]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Public Sector Net Cash Requirement (PSNCR—formerly the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement) is a measure of the public sector's need to borrow cash from other sectors of the economy. The transactions of all public sector bodies, including enterprises and companies in the public sector, contribute to the PSNCR.

The PSNCR is not itself a control. Different budgetary controls are applied to different public enterprises according to their circumstances.

The investment plans of public corporations from 1993–94 to 2001–02 are set out in table 7.3 of "Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 1999–2000" (Cm 4201).

Resource Accounting

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to proceed with the introduction of resource budgeting. [104121]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The next spending review, in 2000, will be conducted on a resource basis. This will fulfil the Government's commitment in the Code for Fiscal Stability to adopt, as soon as reasonably practicable, a resource accounting and budgeting approach for planning and accounting for the costs of resources consumed by government.

The decision to proceed with resource budgeting follows a successful "dry run" of the new procedures carried out by all Departments during the course of 1999. This confirmed that the procedures were workable. However, it also highlighted a transitional issue in relation to Departments' ability to forecast the large new non-cash elements of resource budgets (depreciation, capital charges and provisions) for three years ahead.

To allow time for a track record in forecasting, monitoring and controlling these items to be established, resource budgeting will therefore be introduced in two stages. In the first stage, in the plans drawn up in the 2000 spending review, the big non-cash elements of resource budgets will be part of Annually Managed Expenditure rather than Departmental Expenditure Limits. The intention is that, in the light of experience, these items will be moved into Departmental Expenditure Limits following the 2002 spending review.

Details of the new arrangements are being placed in the Libraries of the House.

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OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 341**

SESSION 1999–2000

13th December—21st December 1999

Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

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The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
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- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

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Choice of headings

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- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
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Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
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- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
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  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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